

Deathrealm

THE GATE WHERE HORROR BEGINS



Issue #3
\$3.00

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Issue Number 3

Fall, 1987

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Artwork Credits

Rodger Gerberding - Inside Backcover; Bill Gudmundson - Cover; Jeff Osier - 39; Ted Piwowar - 50; Mark Rainey - 36, Backcover.

DEATHREALM® is published by Mark Rainey, 8812 Jody Lane, #2A, Des Plaines, IL 60016. Issue #3, copyrighted Fall 1987. Single copy price: \$3.00, subscriptions available, \$11.00 for 4 issues. Dealers please contact publisher for discounted rates. Contributions are welcomed, please include a self-addressed, stamped envelope for possible return of manuscript. High-quality photocopies of manuscripts are acceptable. DEATHREALM is a KAIJU PRESS publication, affiliated with KAIJU PRODUCTIONS, a member of the JAPANESE GIANTS Group, subsidiary of HAPPY ENTERPRISES, Ltd., etc., etc., and so forth.

DEATHREALM supports the Small Press Writers and Artists Organization.

This issue dedicated to Winky the Bird.

Additional Acknowledgements: KB, Phred, Greg (Doc) Shoemaker, Charles (You're a Pertinaire) Perkins, James (Buddy) Smallwood, Douglas (McArthur) Craft, Gus, and John Henry (a steel-drivin' man).

R.I.P. EPITAPH

A super-dyna-whoppin' "howdy" should first be flung towards the patrons of MadCon, held in May in Madison, Wisconsin, at the residence of Mssr. R. Alain Everts, who (despite his best attempts) threw a downright fun event. Meeting so many of the people whose names have been associated with the small press circle was something of a bor- er, uh, thrill, and discovering the new contacts in the bargain made the trip more than worthwhile. Despite some unfortunate ill feelings on the parts of a couple of long-time Lovecraftian compadres, I found the gathering right OK and to all of you whom I met, I enjoyed your company. I'm very happy to say that this particular circle of individuals represents a very special group of creative artists. I speak from experience -- it is ~~most~~ refreshing to find a loosely-knit "organization" with aims toward excellence and integrity rather than immature bickering and selfish snobbery. Of course, there's one in every crowd, but thank god in this case, the minority is a small one.

I think those of you have followed DEATHREALM since its inception will find that each issue has been an improvement over the last, and hopefully, this one will be consistent with that trend. In retrospect, both Issues 1 and 2 have a lot of editing problems (most of you have no doubt noticed the glaring typos) that somewhat take away from the overall slick production. Most of this is due to the fact that I have limited typesetting resources, and am generally pretty hurried -- as often as not, the first proof must be the final copy, so it behooves me to do it right the first time. This issue, I've managed to take more care and hopefully I've ironed out some of the rough edges that have, at least to me, plagued the first two issues. I do appreciate the kind words that most of you have expressed toward DR and myself. Thanks for your support and I look forward to continuing to provide as many of you as possible with an effective and exciting forum.

Issue #4 is already in the works, and should be out on schedule in December. Included should be more ravings from the ever-popular Jeffrey Osier; a moody tale of medieval terror called "The Lowland Beggar" by Colleen Drippé; some sheer madness from David Starkey in the form of a bleakly humorous tableau, entitled "Mrs. McVay Celebrates An Anniversary"; and more steely poetry from Dwight E. Humphries, delicately spiced with sprinklings of Geri Eileen Davis, Steven K. Mitchell, and Wayne Allen Sallee.

Starting this issue, you'll find a review column for publications of the macabre sort, small press, professional, and amateur. If you have magazines, newsletters, or other such publications and desire to have them reviewed here, send copies to Roger Dale Trexler, PO Box 641, Jonesboro, IL 62952. My policy is to give Roger full editorial control of his column. His opinions do not necessarily reflect those of the management (the Great Old Ones will have their way no matter *what* Roger thinks). Planned for the future is a novel review column edited by the right beratable Mr. Ed Shannon. Look for this around issue #4 or #5.

So, please to enjoy the third installment in the terrible DEATHREALM saga. (It's not *all* that terrible!). I meant terribly violent. (Oh, YEAH!). As always, letters of comment are welcomed (let's go here!), and the most constructive will surely appear in the "Out From The Shadows" department next time around. Oh yes, Editors -- if you're interested in advertising in DEATHREALM (you'll get a fair, large field of exposure), contact me for rates or possible swapping of advertising. The latter is the preferred method.

Until the next time around, Sayonara.



Mark Rainey, Editor

A PIECE OF STONE

By W. H. Pugmire

(Dedicated to the memory of J. Vernon Shea)

Desmond Peters gazed at the old gentleman for a long while, amazed at the man's reluctance in agreeing to his request. Determined not to lose patience, he breathed deeply and then addressed the man once more.

"Mr. Vreeland, my request is a valid one. As I mentioned in my letter, I have a reputation for bringing out quality books of prose and verse in the supernatural genre. I produce these books for my own personal enjoyment and the pleasure of my readership. I make very little profit. William Davis Manly is unknown and I want to remedy his obscurity."

"It wasn't of his own choice," the older man replied. "That slim book of his writing that you found was privately published, distributed to a select circle of friends. He had no wish for public notice."

"Perhaps. But his poems are fascinating. They deserve a wider readership. He wrote so well of this valley, of his dreams that were inspired by his life here. What I want to do is illustrate the book with photographs of Sesqua Valley . . ."

"No! No, that is impossible." Nathan Vreeland wore an odd expression, seeming absurdly distressed. "I'm sorry," he added in a soft voice, perhaps trying to conceal his disquiet.

Peters bit his lower lip and, trying to think of something to say, looked around. He stood within a room that was crammed with curiosities. It was the main room of the small house that Vreeland had converted into a shop, and this particular room contained his favorite items. Looking toward one particular corner, Desmond saw the hunched form of a strange creature the likes of which he had never seen -- it seemed oddly distorted. Stepping closer, he saw that a series of folds seemed to suggest a face. The thing had no actual head, only this suggestion of a face made of lumps and folds. It looked like a face that was trying to push itself out of the surrounding flesh. A fetid smell came from the thing. It was not a strong smell, but it had a way of creeping into the man's nostrils and finding the pit of his stomach, which it turned slightly.

"Mr. Peters," said a low voice. Desmond turned to face the old man. Vreeland gazed at him gently, a slight smile lifting the corners of his mouth. "Please, let's get out of this stuffy room." Rising, he motioned his visitor to follow him to a door and out into the brilliant sunlight of the afternoon. "Sesqua is a quiet town, Mr. Peters. Most of us who live here are old, like myself, living solitary lives. Our privacy is of great importance. Outsiders are not welcomed. I am not originally of the valley. I arrived in 1928, and it took a long time for me to feel accepted by the community. Now," and he raised a withered finger to the younger man, "if your book proved popular, it would bring visitors to our valley. I doubt that many of them would be as well-mannered as yourself. William Davis Manly would be to them a very romantic character. His life, the way he vanished, all of this has a fascination for those who hear the tale. We've already had visitors who have read his verse and sought answers to things of which he wrote. Your book would disrupt our lives in a way we could not tolerate. I speak from experience. Would you want that?"

"No," Desmond whispered.

"I am no foe of literature, believe me. I understand your desire to publish things of lasting worth. Manly was a gifted writer, a strange and fascinating man. I knew him, of course, and he would often read me his prose and poems."

"What actually happened to him?"

"No one knows. He vanished one day while wandering the woods of Sesqua Valley." Vreeland shrugged. "It happens occasionally. People often disappear. One

reads of it in the news, but unless it happens in one's personal life, it makes no great impression."

Vreeland paused and looked around him, scanning the woodland as if for answers. Desmond did likewise, catching sight of a huge white mountain.

"That's Mount Selta, isn't it?"

"Hmm?" said Vreeland, awakened from reverie.

"That mountain. Manly wrote a poem, 'Selta,' in which he described a great mountain of white stone which had a curious influence on him. In his dreams he knew the mountain by a different name: 'Khroyd'hon,' and the poem is a mental search for the meaning of the alien name. In his dreams he comes to a place near the mountain where the earth is mutated by alien forces."

"Yes, I recall the poem."

"And that's the mountain, right? A white mountain whose twin peaks resemble wings folded on a demon's shoulders."

"Our William had quite an imagination."

"But it does look -- weird." He gazed at the mountain and felt strangeness enter his soul. His eyes began to play tricks, making it seem as though the mountain were shifting its form ever so slightly. The white stone almost seemed to glow in the bright sunlight. Desmond was hardly aware of the voice that spoke to him.

"Sesqua is a peculiar place, my friend. It has an effect on one's imagination. Certain aspects of it strike outsiders as unusual -- weird, as you said. City folk are especially susceptible." A hand took Desmond's arm and turned him so he no longer saw the mountain. "It's not wise to gaze at Selta for too long a time. Have you been thinking about all that I have told you?"

"Yes. I'm beginning to understand your point of view."

"I thought perhaps you would. Now, you seem tired, and I suggest you spend the night at my house and return to Seattle in the morning. Mine is the white house, you see, with the willow tree growing next to it?"

"Yes, I see it."

"Tonight's supper is stew, with homemade bread."

"That sounds wonderful." Desmond smiled warmly, feeling a growing affection for the old man. "Thank you very much."

"My pleasure. Now, what would you like to do for the rest of the day? I have an interesting library . . ."

"Actually, I think I'd like to look around the valley."

Vreeland frowned for a moment. "Well, you be careful where you wander," he said at last. "We wouldn't want to lose you."

Desmond Peters tried to smile, but something in Vreeland's tone of voice sent a shiver through his flesh. Turning to gaze once more at the mountain, he finally nodded farewell to the older man, and went to where his car was parked.

A cool wind blew through the open window. Desmond rested his arms on the steering wheel and looked at the mountain. Curiosity had brought him to the mountain's base, but a subtle and strange sense of precaution kept him from leaving his car. He could understand how Selta would inspire a poet to dream uncanny dreams. A line from Manly came to him, and he spoke it mentally.

*You wait so silent, still and white,
For when the burning orbs are right;
For then deep gloom o'ershadows Earth --
A time of Death and of Rebirth.*

His voice was carried away by the wind, and his thoughts drifted aimlessly. He had been aware of curious sensations ever since entering Sesqua Valley. He

felt disturbed, perhaps even afraid.

Impatient with himself, he pushed open the door and stepped onto damp soil. Hearing a sound, he looked toward a nearby area of tall grass; and thought he detected something slithering through it. He wondered if this part of Washington State had venomous snakes, and thought once more of Nathan Vreeland's words of caution.

He approached the grass, eyeing it warily, his ears alert for any sound. He found no living thing. A crooked apple tree stood near him, and he reached for an apple that hung from a low branch. He gazed at the apple with disbelief. Its skin was almost black, feeling leathery and warm. He tore into it and felt his stomach shift as a stench assailed his senses. The fruit's gangrenous flesh resembled a festering wound. He hurled it to the ground in disgust.

"Good afternoon."

Desmond started at the sound. Turning, he saw an elderly woman standing near his car. She was handsome, and something in her being seemed full of spirit and determination. Her greying hair was cut short, her brown eyes bespoke intelligence as they twinkled in her pixie-like face.

"Are you lost?"

"No. I'm visiting the valley," he replied, going to her.

"Visitors to the valley are rare, young man. And this particular spot is not a place you'll want to wander."

"Because of the snakes?"

"I beg your pardon," she said, frowning.

"I thought I saw a snake over there a few minutes ago, crawling through the grass."

She looked toward the grass, narrowing her eyes. "There are no snakes in this part of the valley. It must have been something else you saw."

There was an uncomfortable pause as he searched for something to say. He recalled Nathan Vreeland's words concerning the people of Sesqua, of their dislike for outsiders.

"Why isn't this a good place to wander?" he asked at last.

The woman looked around with an attentive air as she spoke. "This place is infected, young man. It's too close to the mountain, it feels too much of Selta's shadow. The soil is diseased, as are those which live beneath it. You would do well to leave."

She spoke these words in a calm voice, as though explaining something that was obvious and easily understood. Her manner was so unpretentious that her words carried a deadly conviction.

"Yes, I think I will leave. It does rather give me the creeps."

At this, she laughed lightly. "Yes, 'the creeps' is very apt. Are you visiting a friend in town?"

"Nathan Vreeland."

"Ah, yes. A good man. Well, I'm away." She gazed at him sternly. "Leave this place soon, young man. It will soon grow dark." Then she turned from him and walked away. He felt a moment's dread, not wanting to be alone. Looking about him, the valley's spectral hush seemed almost palpable. Clouds obscured the sunlight. Mount Selta stood silently in the growing darkness, a pallid thing of mystery and myth.

He would leave this haunted place; but first, he would find a memento to take with him. Looking at the mountain, he saw the place where soil stopped and white stone began. There was a toolbox in his car, and in it, a hammer. Mount Selta had intimidated him long enough. Going to the car, he found the hammer, and with it in his hand he walked to the white stone. He knelt, placing

a hand upon the stone, feeling the smooth surface. He brought his arm to his face, so as to protect his eyes. The hammer swung toward the stone with great force. Bits of the mountain shot toward him, stinging his wrist. The ground beneath him seemed to tremble slightly. From somewhere above, there came an odd wailing sound. Twilight darkened the heavens. He looked for a moment at the chunk of stone he had broken from the mountain; then he went to his car and drove away.

Once more he stood before the white mountain. He tried to look at it, but could not focus his eyesight. His vision blurred, and the mountain refused to take on solid form. It shifted its shape. The jagged peaks seemed to spread themselves like the wings of some primal demon, like some ageless thing that knew no emotion, like something that hungered for his soul. He wanted to flee, but could not avert his gaze. He felt himself sinking into the moist soil, felt the cold earth ooze around him as some unseen force pulled him deep into the dirt. If only he could scream, scream the fear out of his whirling mind, the terror that iced his soul.

Nathan Vreeland, reading in his quiet study, started as the screams echoed from the room above him. Rushing to the room he had given Desmond, he found his visitor huddled in the bed, shivering and naked. The young man's pale body was infested with open sores that oozed blood and slime. To his breast he held a bloodstained chunk of white rock. Vreeland looked at his guest with horror, then rushed to the bed and gently removed the piece of stone from Desmond's grasp.

"Where did you get this?" he asked, fearing that he understood already.

Desmond shook with pain and wept. Then he spoke the verse, one which was familiar to the old man.

*I have seen the land beyond
Where lurks the nameless shadow-spawn'd;
That nightmare-shaded place is found --
Diseased, mutated, fetid ground.*

"Good lord," moaned Vreeland, recognizing Manly's words, and understanding their implications.

"I broke it off the mountain," Desmond muttered.

"And to the mountain it must be returned. It may be that we can save you. You did not understand what you were doing," Vreeland spoke softly, more to himself than to his guest. "I'll return it as quickly as possible."

The journey to the mountain was a nightmare that Nathan never forgot. The wind moaned through the trees, sounding like some melancholy elegy for all of doomed humanity. Finally, he arrived at the mountain. He had never been to this place at night, and felt a sense of dread that, for him, was an uncommon experience. He took the piece of stone to the mountain's base, lowered to his knees and placed the stone upon the ground. From somewhere on the mountain, something wailed and cried. The ground seemed to tremble slightly, as though the mountain were shifting its weight. The place felt unwholesome, and Nathan was glad to leave it.

He was void of emotion as he returned home. He felt nothing but grim determination that this kind of thing should never happen again. Outsiders had to be kept out of the valley. Only those who were part of it, who felt kinship to the land and understood its laws, should dwell within its boundaries.

Finally, he reached home, and with a sense of dread he entered the room where he had left the young man. It was, of course, too late. A terrible violation had been perpetuated, and a price had to be paid. For all its wonders and beauty, Sesqua Valley had its dark, foreboding nature. It showed no mercy.

Nathan allowed the tears to fall as he looked at the bed, and then he turned away. In truth, there was not much to see; for what had once been a young man was now nothing more than a pool of milky deliquescence.

Spiders Always Win

By John Grey

The state lottery office
Is infested with spiders
That burrow under the skin, lay
nests, breed by the thousands,
Crawl up into the brain and spin
Off a million hallucinations
Of teeth-gritting horror.



He was ecstatic when he won the
Major prize but, each January,
The check arrives for \$50,000
And the spiders, hidden in the
Envelope's folds, suddenly pop out.
He needs that money and more
To pay the psychiatrists
Who shake him out of those living terrors.

I saw him the other day, body thin
As a pipe-cleaner, wailing outside
The general store at fools rushing in
From the cold to play their numbers.
I stared for a moment into his blank eyes
And saw eight tiny legs spurt across
The dull brown iris.



Invitation

By Dwight E. Humphries

My Blood runs sweet,
A rich wine
Spiced and hot.
Come, maiden Death,
Enter my halls
With merriment,
Feast upon me, drink deep
And feel the poison course
Through your frame,
Taste time's bitterness.
Enter as beggar,
Enter as queen
It makes no difference
I'll conquer you the same.

Death, you hold no power
In my terrible land
Colder than star silence,
Emptier than gods' eyes.
Might shorn,
You are but a spectre
At my laden table,
I, a Lord who will
Laugh at your pain.

Feel the fire in your bones,
Leaving your sense cold.
Death,
You shall be my standard
Nailed to vast beams,
A groaning banner
Before my hosts
Held sorcery fast.

HATE MAIL

By Roger Dale Trexler

The doorbell chimed loudly. In the frontroom, on the couch, Hank Whitlock moved out of the sleeping mode into the waking sense.

Sort of.

The night before came back to him as he groaned into an upright position, his body aching with each movement. He remembered the party, vaguely. It had been a real wild one -- sex, booze, rock n' roll. His date, Eileen Spence from down the block, had left sometime in the night with Josh Dianno. He'd mourned her loss via boozing himself senseless.

He waded through the thick slush of beer cans, empty potato chip wrappers, and assorted other oddities that parties always produced, and walked toward the door.

On the third ring, he answered.

No one was there.

He stepped out, instantly holding his hand in front of his eyes to ward off the early morning sun, and looked around. He saw no one -- but his head felt like a ton of bricks had dropped on it.

As he turned to go back into the house, shrugging off whoever had rung the doorbell, he noticed the mail. There was one postcard sitting in the slot beneath the box, and he snatched it up quickly. It was a weird picture postcard -- of a dilapidated old home. It gave him the chills.

He took it as the cold autumn wind affecting him, although he was still dressed from the night before. Still, the goosebumps appeared. The cold was just the easiest excuse.

He turned the note over. He'd been so fascinated with the weird picture that he hadn't noticed the words scribbled haphazardly across the back of the postcard. He read: STRAIGHTEN UP -- OR GET OUT!

That, and nothing more. No signature.

"Fuck you," he said to whoever had written the note. It was probably the neighbor, an old man named Henry Smitty. He had called the cops on a couple of Whitlock's wild parties, claiming the noise was keeping him awake.

Whitlock had threatened to beat the crap out of the old man. If his friends hadn't stopped him, he probably would have.

He threw the small postcard into the trashcan, ignoring its message.

Instead, he went to the refrigerator and took one of the few remaining beers. He guzzled it down, hoping it would help to fight off the immense hangover. It always helped a hangover if you drink a beer in the morning -- so he believed.

After that, he waded through the house made it to the bathroom to take a shower. Someone had vomited in the shower. He had to rinse it out before he stepped in.

Whitlock was ready to party again by the time evening had come. He hadn't lived in the house long -- a mere two weeks. Most of that time had been spent readjusting to the fact that he was a free man again, freshly divorced from his wife of five years, Carla. She had run off with another man after he had repeatedly come in drunk and physically abused her.

The divorce had hurt. That, in part, was the reason he drank so much. But the fact that he was an alcoholic was the truer reason.

In his life -- he was thirty-one -- he had drank his fair share of alcohol in the local bars, met a lot of the area's "bar room luses," and befriended his fair share of the patronage. Now that he was divorced and moved in, he told himself that it was time to live it up. And there were plenty of friends he knew

from his years at the bars that would keep him company.

He wouldn't be lonely.

So, having forgotten about the postcard from that morning, he jumped on the telephone and called up some of his acquaintances from the bars.

Sally Calaman, from down at the Mainstreet Drink and Dance Bar, was the first one he called. She had been a lot of fun (and quite good in bed) the last time he had been with her.

After that, he dialed more numbers -- mostly women's.

The party started around 7:30 pm. By that time, he had forgotten about the mail. He was far more interested in getting laid.

Success is measured in many ways. Hank Whitlock measured it by how many women he could flirt with, and score with, at the same time. Sally Calaman was, naturally, his first conquest. They managed to slip off into the bedroom very early in the evening. The volume of the stereo managed to cover the echoes of her orgasm.

After that, Sally left. She was married, and was supposed to have been home two hours earlier. She would have to lie her way out of this one.

Whitlock wasn't worried about her -- he had other women to worry about.

By the time the party was over, he had acquired Toni Wells, a waitress at the Dixie Cafe down the road.

The party ended around 3 am, after the second keg had run dry. Then, Hank and Toni slipped off to the bedroom for a nightcap.

A loud noise came at the door about 5 am. Hank looked up, half-drunk and half-asleep. He had just gone to sleep about thirty minutes ago.

Toni, naked, lay beside him. He had been so drunk that he couldn't remember if she was a good lay or not.

He got out of bed, grudgingly yelling at the front door, "Who is it?" He was cursing whoever it was under his breath.

No response.

"Who the hell is it?" he said. He was getting very angry.

"I'll peel your damned head like a potato!" he called.

He jerked open the door. No one was there. But, someone *had* been there. There was the same postcard -- the same picture as the last one. But this one had a threat on it. It read: THAT'S IT! GET OUT BY THE END OF THE WEEK OR ELSE!

As before, no signature was affixed to the note.

"Screw you, buddy!" he yelled into the morning air. "This place is mine, and I'll damned well do what I want to here! You coward!"

He stared into the darkness, hoping that the culprit might take offense and want to fight over it. He was ready to punch someone's headlights out.

After a few minutes, however, Whitlock turned back into the house. The coward wasn't going to show his face. Madness kept him awake, and he finally decided that he should find out if Toni had been good the night before or not.

She was.

The end of the week crept up on Whitlock. Every morning, he would wake up to either the ringing of the doorbell or a heavy thudding knock at the door. Always, no one would be there. Only a new postcard -- always with the same photo -- greeted him with the reminder: THE END OF THE WEEK, OR ELSE! He wasn't sure what the "or else" meant, but he was beginning to feel apprehensive. He had thought about calling the cops, but had chickened out at the last moment. He was afraid they would ask too many questions, nose around a bit too much.

Then, they might raid one of his parties and catch him -- and his friends -- snorting a little coke or smoking grass.

So, he decided to settle the matter himself.

It was Friday night, the end of the week. Whitlock was damned tired of the postcards, and the occasional knocks and rings. And he didn't like to be threatened.

So, he loaded up the pistol he'd bought years ago for defending his family, and sat on the couch near the front door. He wasn't sure anyone would come, but he damned well wanted to be ready.

He sat there and waited.

And nearly jumped out of his skin when the phone rang.

"Hello?" he said, picking it up cautiously after the third ring.

"Hank?" It was a woman's voice.

"Yeah? Who's this?"

A soft giggle. "Can't you tell? It's me, Toni! I just . . . uh, sorta . . . uhhh . . . wondered what you were doing tonight."

"Sittin' at home."

For a minute, dead air crossed the line. Toni was trying to decide whether or not she would be too "forward" by asking him. But, finally, she said, "Can I come over?"

"I . . . I don't know." He looked at the pistol in his lap, feeling suddenly like a fool. No one was going to hassle *him*, and he had been feeling the need for sex lately. "Sure . . . I guess so. Come on over. I'll leave the light on."

"Thanks, honey!" Toni said. "I didn't like the thought of spending the night alone. I'll be right over."

"OK." He hung up the telephone, feeling more like a fool than ever. He got up, took the pistol from his lap, and placed it on the desk in his bedroom -- just in case any monkey business was intended.

Half an hour later, a knocking sounded from the front door. Whitlock got up, walked to the door, and stood there for a moment, unsure what might be on the other side.

He glanced back at his bedroom, where the gun was, wishing he had it in his hand. But then, if it was Toni, she wouldn't understand. She'd think he was crazy; then, no sex for this night.

So he let it remain there.

He opened the door.

To his horror, he saw it. *It* wasn't quite the right term, but *it* was all he could think of.

There was a postcard in its hand, the wooden fingers holding the paper tightly. He could read the writing on it; it read: I WARNED YOU. NOW YOU'LL PAY THE CONSEQUENCES!

With that, the wooden hand that had been the door facing dropped the postcard and lurched out at him. Whitlock, too agape with horror and surprise, was an easy victim. It throttled him, wrapping its wooden fingers around his neck with ease.

He didn't even have a chance to scream.

Toni arrived about forty-five minutes later. She knocked at the door, but no one answered.

Then, she unconsciously looked over at the mailbox. There was a note there, printed on a weird postcard. It read: TONI, I HAD TO STEP OUT FOR A MINUTE. GO ON IN AND MAKE YOURSELF COMFORTABLE. I'LL BE BACK SOON.

It wasn't signed.

So, taking the message, she went into the house and sat down on the couch. She turned on the TV, flicked through the channels, found *Miami Vice*. Don Johnson was trying not to get killed by rock singer Ted Nugent in a rerun episode.

She sat and watched, thinking that Don Johnson was cool.

Then, a noise came from the bedroom. She sat there, scared to death for a moment. She wondered if maybe a prowler had broken into the house.

But, just as quickly as she thought it, she discarded the idea. More likely, she thought, Hank was in there -- had been in there all the time! -- and was trying to scare her.

"Well," she said softly to herself. "I'll teach him who's afraid of the big, bad wolf!"

She walked to the bedroom door (which was closed), and slowly opened it. She expected him to jump from behind the door at any second ("Boo!"), trying to scare her.

The light from the front room shone in on the bedroom, and she saw what had made the noise. Hank was in bed, obviously dead. His color was all gone.

She screamed.

But Hank wasn't the reason.

There were arms jutting out from the walls, part wood and part plaster. One of them held the gun that had been sitting on the table.

As she screamed, it fired.

She thumped to the floor. The arms retracted into the wall and reappeared near her. It dragged her dead body -- along with Whitlock's -- into the cellar. There, it obtained a shovel from the cellar tool closet, and proceeded to dig a hole in the basement. The concrete separated for the task, revealing the previous graves that had been dug.

Then, after the burial was finished and the concrete floor had gone smooth again, the thing in (and of) the walls went to the attic to get another postcard. A former tenant, the first to live in this house, had worked as a photographer for a postcard company. The house had been quite dilapidated then, before he remodeled. He had made postcards of the house in its prior condition to send to his friends.

But alas, he had died early -- and most of his postcards had never been used. Until the other tenants moved in, that is.

Two days later, Nolan Roberts, advertising agent for *The City Herald* newspaper, received a postcard with a check attached. It was a photo of an under-the-weather house.

The note read:

FOR RENT: NICE SINGLE ROOM BEDROOM HOUSE IN THE
SUBURBS. RECENTLY REMODELED. \$175.00 A MONTH. NO
DEPOSIT REQUIRED. PREFER SINGLE PERSON. TENANT
MUST BE VERY, VERY QUIET. NO PARTYING ALLOWED!

A Rural Truth As Ugly

By Wayne Allen Sallee

Too quiet,
then an electric snap
and a gentle blue: the end
of a stupid moth's
existence
in God's country,
Etchison's Dark Country.
Spider country.
Followed
by wind flaps
in farmer sheets
and panties grey
with hard water
from God's Country.
Etchison's . . . flapwhup
a cross
between a sock stretched
taut in a funereal getup
or the chopper
blades reprimanding
that Morrow finish
the scene right.
Farmers expect that.
A funereal Get! Up!
Milk that goat at 7:00:00 am
Guilt instilled
with every crap
turd dropping with flies.
The best and the brightest:
Farmers are. And after
the crops are tended
and the hay is baled
and the straw is pitched
and the dishes are done
and before the sermons
they attend
to clubbing a deformed
calf and slip food
under sooty doors
keeping an embarrassment
of retardation from
the other good farmers

of spider country.
god's . . . it is not finished.
Soon babies born
one arm short
will be jammed in a butter
churn and churned and churned
until its flesh is slag,
but it sure did its part, by gum!
Butter for all,
to appease the bitch --
goddess of the plains.
The sky is a killing jar
set atop a big table
of squares of wheat
and corns and stuff.
Drink your Busch
beer quickly, my friend,
for this I know:
The Wabash Valley eats her dead.
The ground moves
with the fodder
of simple cattle
that has been there
since Lincoln freed
the slaves and beyond.
God Bless America.
God Bless Us All.
Farmers are strong
like bull.

TABLEAU

By Wayne Rile Williams

Its shadow falls over her . . . its clown makeup shining in the dim light, . . . Eyes glazed, . . . mouth, a blue rictus revealing broken stumps of teeth . . . It brings the club down, disfiguring her face. There is a soft mewling sound, as the club strikes her again, . . . again . . . on the breasts/skull . . .

SOUND UNDER: DRIP,
RING

Vincent Jarlath pulls strings on his battling puppets . . . *Symphonique Fantastique* providing soundtrack for the play . . . Something white/glistening, inches its way up the strings . . . Little boy in the audience clicks his lobster claw hands in appreciation of the performance, inadvertently sheering off a baby's head . . . Nearby, policeman drops his billy club, bends to retrieve it . . . Seeing him, Vincent's smile melts from his face, cold hand closing over his heart . . . He shudders involuntarily, as he pulls strings CONTROLLING his puppets . . . CONTROL . . .

CONTROL had been slipping out of his grasp, lost in vortex of years . . . for a while, cocaine had given him the illusion of CONTROL, but, it had cost him his wife/job, . . . leaving him CONTROL of nothing . . . He was floundering/lost when he had met Paula Trinette at a singles bar he frequented . . .

The puppets are dancing now to Holst's *The Planets* overdubbed with chants of "seig heil!" . . . Leopard-spotted girl in the audience smiles, munching on the baby's discarded head, pieces of brain/gore running down her chin . . . Vincent licks his parched lips, his face ashen . . . The policeman (*why doesn't he leave? . . . why? . . .*)

SOUND UNDER: DRIP,
RING

Paula was half his age . . . He'd spent the night with her in her room at Radley Hotel . . . Drunk, she'd confided in him that she was confused, . . . couldn't handle the pressures in life . . . she needed someone to tell her what to do . . . He had combed his fingers through her long blond hair, . . . comforting her . . . As she sobbed about the failures in her life, he had smiled inwardly . . . by taking command of her life, perhaps, he could gain some dominion over his own . . . He'd begun to see her often after that, . . . molding/guiding her . . .

The 'female' puppet kicks the 'male' in the groin accompanied by *Pictures At An Exhibition* . . . The policeman paces, as though waiting for something . . . what? . . . Watching him, Vincent's heart quickens . . . Something plops wetly into his open mouth, . . . he spits it out, gagging . . . In the audience, a boy with a starling's head plucks out the eyeball of a companion with a yellow beak . . . Boy's father, his body a silver birdcage, spans his recalcitrant child . . .

SOUND UNDER: DRIP,
RING

As their affair progressed, Paula began to reject his influence, becoming in-

solent It could have been her self assurance returning, but he suspected the presence of another lover Spying on her later that week had confirmed his suspicions Again, CONTROL was eluding him He started to formulate a plan

The *Passacaglia* overdubbed with torture sounds plays counterpoint to the percussive sound of the club's impact on the fallen puppet's head Unnaturally magnified by his bifocals, Vincent's steel grey eyes dart from the stage to the policeman repeatedly Something lands on his arm, clinging tenaciously to a tendril of hair Siamese twins in the audience giggle, as they slash each other with straight razors An injured six-legged dog makes a meal of its own intestines

SOUND UNDER: DRIP,
RING

Using his key, he had entered Paula's room at night, emptying his silenced pistol into the slumbering bodies of Paula and her lover that much had been easy, the rest had been difficult/risky

Vincent manipulates his puppets, they bow, doffing their pointed hats. He brings up the basement's house lights, illuminating the faces of audience painted on surreal wall mural He hastily checks the tiny window that overlooks the street Seeing that the beat cop outside has finally left, he sighs, . . . dabbing the sweat from his brow As he leaves the basement, he takes one last look at his 'puppets': Paula's bullet-ridden corpse, and her female lover's dangle from the cables that control them, . . . exiting maggots wriggle over their faces, . . . falling in a gelatinous rain on the stage Cat with bell collar laps contentedly at puddle of blood . . . formed . . . by . . . their . . . dripping . . . wounds.

A SUMMER STORY

By Russell Roberts

How well I remember that fateful summer. Even now, two years later, each little incident is firmly fixed in my memory, like some horrible photographs that my brain seems compelled to flip through over and over again. But the mind is funny; it makes you remember, and yet it tries to make you forget. Sometimes, when I sit in the porch swing shelling peas, watching Josh plow the fields and listening to the barn door squeal on its hinges, I can almost convince myself that it all never happened . . . almost.

It had been a hot, dry spring that year, the type that causes the lettuce to go to seed early and the peas to wither on the vine. Summer greeted us with more of the same, and it became a common sight for huge clouds of billowing dust to suddenly rise up from the parched ground and descend on the fields like a swarm of locusts.

Every night Josh and I would sit on the front porch after supper and talk about everything but the one thing that was on our minds, as if denying it would make it go away. Finally, when we had talked ourselves out, he would light his pipe and I would put my hands in my lap and we would search the orange sunset, looking for any kind of sign that Nature was ready to make things right and send a long, steady rain our way. But nothing worked out for us that year.

I remember when it all began. I had been baking pies to sell at the county fair, and had just taken my fifth blueberry out of the oven to cool. Between the heat outside and the oven inside, the kitchen felt like the devil's living room. I was thinking how good a cold glass of lemonade would taste when our twelve-year-old son Timmy burst into the room from out back.

"Mama, I think something's wrong with Mr. Rags," he panted. "His coat is all dull and he's as lazy as a turtle in the sun. Why, Miss Jenkins' sassy black cat practically pranced on his face, and all Rags did was look at her."

Oh, what a fine-looking boy my Timmy was even at that tender age. Auburn hair crowning a freckled face, deep blue eyes just like his daddy, and a kind mouth that always had a smile playing around it. He was the apple of my eye, my one and only.

His daddy loved him just as much, in Josh's quiet, strong way, but farming's too jealous a mistress to let a man lavish attention on both the land and a family. I tried to fill that empty space in Timmy's life by being his mother and his best friend, but there are times when a boy just needs his dad.

Rags filled the space in Timmy's life that I couldn't; those two were as close as Siamese twins. The only times that Timmy had ever gotten a beating was when Josh had caught him throwing his peaches down from the tree to Rags, who caught them in his mouth and stripped the meat from the pit just in time to catch the next one.

I smiled at Timmy. "Oh, it's probably just the heat. I think Miss Jenkins' sassy black cat could dance on my face today and I wouldn't lift a finger." I turned to the refrigerator. "You want a cold glass of lemonade to wash the dust out of your throat?"

When he didn't answer, I turned back. He was twisting the end of his tee-shirt around and around his fingers. On his face was a look I had never seen before, a frightened, concerned look that was out of place on his usually cheerful face. "What's the matter, Timmy?" I asked.

He looked at me, and the pain in his eyes was so real it made me wince.

"There's something else, Mama; he's got . . . marks on his neck. Two of them. They look like bites."

Doc Pritchard stood up from the barn floor, where he had been kneeling to examine Rags. Tiny bits of hay stuck to his pants. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with a red bandana and sighed.

"They're bites, all right," he said, pushing his glasses back from the tip of his nose. "But I can't tell you what bit him." He ran a hand through his white hair, then shook his head. "It's damn peculiar. This is the third case I've seen like this in the past three days."

I stood with Timmy alongside Rags, who lay like a sack of wet laundry on the ground. It had taken all our strength to drag the dog into the barn; he seemed unable to move on his own. All he had managed was a slight wag of his tail, and this from a dog that could run down a rabbit with ease.

"Could it be a wolf, Doc?" I asked. My hands were on Timmy's shoulders and I was trying to rub the tension out of his tightened muscles.

Pritchard snorted as he bent to pack up his instruments. "A wolf? Effie, there hasn't been a wolf in this state for fifty years." He straightened up and pushed his glasses back on his nose again. "No, these bites are very small and very clean, as if they've been done with an extremely sharp knife."

Timmy stepped forward. "I know what bit him, Doc."

"Is that so?" Pritchard said, gazing at Timmy through his glasses. "What?"

Timmy turned to look at me, then took a deep breath and faced Pritchard again. "It was a vampire."

Doc's face fell so low that his jaw practically scraped the hay off the barn floor. "A vampire?" He looked at me, waiting for the joke. "Effie, did he say a vampire?"

I didn't know what to say. Like his father, Timmy never spoke unless he was certain, but when he was, he wouldn't back down. Yet I couldn't help thinking that his obsession with monsters and vampires had gotten the best of him this time. A room full of monster models and books about people coming back from the dead could be a powerful elixir for a lonely boy.

Timmy said, in a quiet but determined voice, "There's lots of symptoms . . . I read about them in my books . . . like the size of the bite marks . . ."

The old doctor looked at me, stunned that I wasn't putting a stop to this nonsense. "Size of the bite marks don't mean a thing, son," he said slowly. "Any number of animals could have done this. Besides, where'd you get measurements of a 'vampire's' teeth anyway? Did you rush up to the TV and measure Bela Lugosi's fangs?"

Timmy scuffed the ground with one dirty sneaker. The sun was heading down the sky, making the shadows grow long in the barn. Pritchard and Timmy stood in the stuffy heat like two old tom cats scraping over a bird and waiting for the other to back down.

Finally, Pritchard emphatically snapped his bag shut. "It's this heat," he said to no one in particular. "Makes us say and do crazy things. Damn weather's been unnatural . . . Mother Nature's gone crazy. Getting back for shooting all those rockets into outer space." As he walked away, he said over his shoulder, "Just keep Rags out of the sun. I'll be back to you soon."

"He doesn't believe me, does he, Mama?" Timmy said as we watched the old man get into his car.

Gently I squeezed his shoulder. As the noise of Pritchard's engine faded away, the only sound came from Rag's hollow panting. The world suddenly seemed a lonely, uncertain place. "Tim, it's a very hard thing . . ."

He craned his head back and look straight into my eyes. "Mama, do you believe me?"

I tried to look back at him, but couldn't. We always had an honest relationship,

Tim and me. In a world where his father was usually too busy or too tired to be much more than a wave and a handshake, I felt strongly that he deserved at least that much. Right when I longed for Josh's strength to be able to say, in his earthy way, "That's a lot of cow crap, Tim."

But I couldn't bring myself to say that, so I just looked at the ground.

After a frozen moment, Timmy said quietly, "I'm going out on my bike, Mama. I'll be back before supper."

I watched him go, wondering what type of world God had made for innocents to live in.

Timmy came back just in time for supper. The meal went like it always did, Josh talking about the farm and outlining Timmy's chores for the next day. Josh knew that Rags was sick and wanted to comfort his son, but didn't know how to go about it. He was a good man, a man who could work all day and night when necessary, never complaining, doing what had to be done because that was what a man was supposed to do. He understood work and sweat and duty. It was the less tangible parts of life that eluded him.

When supper was done, Josh went in to catch the Farm Report on TV. Timmy waited until the sound of the television filled the air, and then said, "Mama, Doc Pritchard was wrong."

I put down the plate I was carrying to the sink. A sense of fear filled me like air in a balloon. "Wrong about what, Timmy?"

He twisted in his chair and faced me. "There isn't just three cases of strange dog bites; there's at least a dozen."

I felt my stomach lurch. "How do you know this?"

"I went into town and asked around," he said. "Bill Ames' hound dog, Bob Rogers' collie, Sarah Neil's poodle . . . even Scoop Wilson's mutt has them. A lot of kids haven't said anything yet because prices and crops ain't been too good lately, and they don't want to see their parents laying out money for Doc Pritchard . . . especially when it doesn't do much good."

Suddenly, I felt weak in the knees; everything went black for a moment, and I had to clutch the countertop to keep from slumping to the floor. I instinctively felt that something bad, something horribly bad, was bearing down on us like a runaway freight train. There, in my comfortable, familiar kitchen, my son was telling me the wildest, most outlandish thing I had ever heard. It's the heat, Effie, I told myself; nothing's been right since this heat started. Everything's been out of whack; get a grip on yourself. Yet I knew my son better than anyone alive, and what scared me most was that I knew he would never say any of these things unless he believed them to be true.

My throat felt dry as the ground. "Please, Timmy," I whispered, "let Doc handle this. There's no real proof . . ."

He shook his head. "No, Mama, there's something else I didn't tell you."

I didn't want to hear. But I listened anyway.

"Joe Filson saw it," Timmy said in a low voice, as if afraid that someone or something would overhear him. "He got up to go to the bathroom two nights ago and heard something strange outside. When he looked out the window he saw it biting his little dog Bucky." His voice was a mixture of amazement and fear; his hands kept twisting the ends of his tee-shirt. "It was tall and horrible-looking, Joe said, with red eyes that glowed in the dark. It sank its teeth into Bucky's neck like it was biting a melon. When the head lifted, Joe saw in the moonlight two small rivers of blood flowing down from its mouth."

Then my son said very quietly, but with the authority of one who knows what has to be done, "Mama, I have to kill this thing and save Rags and all the other

dogs."

"No, Tim," I said, grabbing his arm. "No, it isn't a monster. It's some kind of maniac with a sharp knife that's going around hurting dogs. You could get killed. The sheriff"

Gently, he pried his arm off my wrist. There was a calmness and maturity about him that frightened me. Where is my baby, I thought wildly. Where is the little boy that was just playing with toy trucks in the mud? Bring him back to me, God. He was only here such a short time.

"The sheriff won't believe me any more than Doc Pritchard did," he said. Somebody has to save those dogs, Mama. They can't defend themselves. Dogs are so good to us, and never ask for anything in return. When they're in trouble, they need people to help them. If I don't stop this thing from biting them, it'll keep doing it 'til it kills them. I'm the only one who knows about vampires."

Then his face got very dark, as if the shadow of Death had fallen on it. "Besides, once this thing has used up all the dogs, it'll start on the people."

I threw my arms around him. "Timmy, no. Please. Let the police and Doc Pritchard handle this. Please." I hugged him, feeling how very, very frail he really was.

"Please, Timmy," I implored. "Please promise Mama you won't try to do this. Please. Promise me."

He was silent for a long time. The only sound in the kitchen was Josh's Farm Report and the harsh sound of my own breathing.

"OK, Mama," he said finally. "I won't go."

Later that night, after we had all gone to bed, a terrible nightmare woke me up.

In my dream, all of Timmy's plastic monster models in his room had come to life and were closing in on him, as he lay sleeping in bed. I tried to get to him, but my steps were slow and ponderous, like I was walking through wet tar. Just as the models were about to fall on him I woke up, soaked with sweat and short of breath.

Unable to go right back to sleep I got up and went to the window. Our bedroom was upstairs, and I could see out over the fields, which lay bathed in the light of the full moon. Usually at this time of year the plants were strong and hearty and bursting with fruit, but now they stood wilted and scrawny, leaves bent downward. It was like Pritchard said, I thought: Mother Nature had gone crazy. A seam had split somewhere in the natural order of things, allowing chaos to run loose on the earth. In such a world as this, was anything impossible?

I went back to bed and fell into a restless, fitful sleep.

Very early the next morning, while I was fixing breakfast and Josh was out slopping the hogs, Yosetta the Gypsy came to the back door. Many people thought she was a white witch, but I didn't care. All I know is that her ointment once healed Josh's back when all the high-priced doctors were talking about an operation.

"Do you know where your son is?" she asked immediately upon coming into the kitchen, her long skirts flapping and the red scarf over her hair rustling like dried autumn leaves.

Taken aback, I pointed toward the stairs. "Yes, he's"

The old woman shook her head, her large gold earrings bouncing back and forth. "He is not in his bed. He is in Great Stone Swamp."

My breath hung in my throat. "Great Stone Swamp? Why?"

Yosetta sat down heavily on a kitchen chair. "I knew why he had come the moment he knocked on my door last night. There has been a clear disruption in the order of things. The signs have been unmistakeable." For a moment she

hesitated.

Then she looked me straight in the eye. "I tried to talk him out of what he wanted to do, but . . . he is a very determined boy. So I gave him a blessed rosary, garlic, and the small hatchet that I use for cooking." She leaned forward, staring intently at me. "Someone had to do the deed . . . restore the natural balance."

My head felt like it was filled with helium; the kitchen swam before my eyes. Holding onto the counter for support, I gasped, "Why Great Stone Swamp?"

Yosetta sat back and crossed herself. "Where else but the Devil's house would you look for the Devil's servant?"

Less than two hours later, as the sun began its slow, lazy climb into the summer sky, Josh and I and Sheriff Brant were leading three teams of men with baying bloodhounds into Great Stone Swamp to look for Timmy.

The swamp is a fearful place, full of twisted, low-hanging trees, snakes, and patches of quicksand. The water that curls around everything is dark and cloudy, hiding whatever foul creatures live beneath it. It truly is a devil's house.

I had told Josh and the sheriff that Timmy suspected that a crazy person was hurting the dogs, and that while gathering berries Yosetta had seen him going into the swamp to look for him. Nothing else needed to be said.

Finally, after several hours and despite the bloodhounds, I was the one that found my son, wandering by myself down a path far removed from where the dogs were taking us. He was lying on the thick roots of an old swamp maple. His throat had been torn out. Yet even though he must have died horribly, in his eyes was a look of satisfaction I will never forget.

Blood was caked onto the front of his striped tee-shirt that I had given him for his twelfth birthday . . . the birthday on which Josh had proudly announced to him, "Now, you are a man."

Nearby, on a strange-looking pile of ashes and brackish mud, was Rosetta's rosary, garlic, and hatchet. I kicked a large clump of wet earth onto the pile. Then I kissed my baby, and gently closed his eyes.

I miss that boy every waking minute of my life. Josh feels the loss too, though he doesn't come out and say it. Yet he moves slower now, as if he's aged twenty years over the last two.

Sometimes, when the sun is sinking low and the wheat shines golden in the twilight, I look toward the driveway, expecting to see Timmy come barreling up on his bicycle in a cloud of dust. Then I remember, and curse God for the world he has made.

The sheriff marked the case down as an accidental death from an animal attack. The day after Timmy died, the rains came, pouring down on the thirsty fields with a long-awaited vengeance. The dog attacks stopped and all recovered, including Rags, but the doubts haunted me until some months later.

It was Christmas, and I had wanted to buy a grave blanket, but old Harry Dennis, the caretaker, talked me out of it.

"You don't need no grave blanket, Effie," he said gently, a smile creasing his lined face. "I've been meaning to tell you this . . . it's the damndest thing I ever saw. Every night at sundown, a different dog comes from town and lays on Timmy's grave, and stays there until sun-up. It's like they're taking turns or something. Your boy is never going to be cold."

I can just see the smile on Timmy's face.

The Uninvited

By Geri Eileen Davis

I've never been invited
But I'm never turned away
Should I choose to call
Whether it be the night or day

I'm never happily welcomed
By anyone at all
But it doesn't matter
I will always come to call

Although you have not met me
You will know me when I come
For my name is Death
And I will visit anyone

I've never been invited
But I'm never turned away
Should I choose to call
Whether it be night or day

Yes, I am always free to come
At any time I choose
And when I am ready
Then I will call on you

Infinity of Evil

By Steven K. Mitchell

Underwater

Sharks

Swimming sudden death

Whales

Benign behemoths disappearing

Mantas

Wide wings descending

Deeper

Where myriad sea creatures coldly fight
In a savage world forever night

And where HE strangely sits, unheeding
With eternal heart still bleeding

His troubled mind is dreaming
Pondering, planning, screaming

For evil days, soon to come
When blood and tears will run

And the mortals dwelling above
Who stain the ground as scum

Will satiate the growing anger
In HIM who hates forever

Other times HE can remember
When with Gabriel, HE was a member

Of the shining, winged light brigade
Serving GOD, who of all things made

Knowing GOD must be obeyed
But HE was not afraid

So magnificent was HIS being
Drunk with power, HE was reeling

From his deepest soul revealing
Foul dreams of glory stealing

GOD read HIM as an open book
And all dimensions infinite shook

For the wrath of GOD is terrible to behold
Righteous vengeance the bringer of pain and woe

GOD's hand entered HIS immortal soul
Then twisted proud spirit from angel to mole

Creating a mockery of the betrayer's goal
By leaving HIM king of a forsaken hole

To rule an infinity of perverted dreams
Forever in filth and disease

Placed far from the gleaming gates
In an endless trap with no escape

Worlds of thinking creatures in HIS reach
Who willingly into unholy flames leap

For all in this life cycle are flawed
Dregs in the handiwork of GOD

HE is now their master
And HE contemplates disaster

For the beings of one small, sodden planet
Named Earth by those who span it

Insignificant animals with vicious hearts
Evil and confusion sum their parts

Vainly thinking they possess real power
Crudely destroying beasts and flowers

All good in this realm eventually sours
Moments of peace can be measured in hours

Yet, now comes the time of true insanity
When HE mercilessly destroys humanity

Pronouncing a death sentence
Forever repeated as humans achieve sentence . . .

HE now rises from the bottom of the sea
Anticipating destruction with perverse glee

For what is to be always will be
And from this reality HE will never be free

So begins the task at hand
The murder of each woman, child and man

Mercy plays no part in the scheme
For SATAN is the stuff of nightmares

Not dreams

THE SWIMMING POOL PREGNANCY

By David Starkey

Old Wives' Tale #409: "You shouldn't swim in a public pool, because if there's a man's sperms swimming around in there, you can get pregnant."

No matter that the chlorine would surely kill the sperm.

No matter that the cold water would slow the sperm down so much they couldn't swim.

No matter that men don't very often even *release* their sperm into swimming pools.

"You shouldn't swim in a public pool," the unnamed Old Wives said sagaciously, "because if there's a man's sperms swimming around in there, you can get pregnant."

Well, that was the *only* way it could have happened to Linda Dale.

She knew it. She was sure of it. There simply was no other way it could have happened.

But her husband, as one might expect, did not believe her.

Her husband was sterile. The tests had all been quite conclusive. He even had himself tested again after Linda told him she was pregnant.

The results showed that he was still sterile. He produced absolutely no viable sperm. As far as the doctor could tell, Mark had never been fertile.

So of course Mark thought his wife had made love to another man.

"You *lied* to me," Mark said quietly. "That's what hurts the most. After all our talks, after all our discussions, after we *both* decided we'd be happy without children, you slept with someone who could make you pregnant. Because I'm not man enough, am I? Because I'm not a real man, am I?"

"Oh, Mark," Linda said. "Mark, of course I didn't sleep with another man. I love you, Mark. I'd never . . ."

"Lord knows you've had enough opportunity. With me travelling all the time. Lord knows you've had plenty of . . ."

They had lived in New Orleans for seven months. And Linda could truthfully say that she did not have even one friend in the city -- male or female. She had such a difficult time meeting people. Such a wretchedly difficult time. She and Mark had made six moves in their seven years of marriage. And those moves, as well as her natural inclination to shyness and an almost obsessive fascination with the romantic aspects of her own loneliness, had pretty well insured that there was only one significant person in her life -- and that person was Mark. He meant *everything* to her. *He* was her only link to humanity. *He* was all of humanity that she had allowed herself -- or wanted -- for years. She didn't even have the comfort of her parents. Her own parents were dead, and she had always been sure (in spite of Mark's assurances to the contrary) that Mark's parents did not like her.

And here he was now, thoughtlessly insinuating that she had met another man . . .

Linda began to cry.

"Or did you have yourself artificially inseminated?" he asked. "Is that it? After you told me you didn't want children? Oh, Linda," he moaned. "Why did you feel you had to lie to me? Why didn't you just tell me you wanted children? If only we had *talked* about this, I wouldn't feel so . . . betrayed."

He was a strong man, a rugged-looking and handsome man who seemed to exude confidence and independence. He did not look like the sort of man who would cry. But he wept then; he turned his back toward his wife and wept.

"Please," Linda said. "Please, Mark, believe me. I *wasn't* unfaithful. And I didn't get artificially inseminated -- not like you mean, anyway. It wasn't intent-

ional. It's all so strange. I fell into that pool, Mark. I swear it. Oh, Mark, don't do this to us. Mark, I love you so much. I'd never do anything to hurt you."

"Up until today --" he said, not turning to face her, "up until I got my new test results, I thought I might be OK after all. I thought I might be the father. But now I know I can't be a father -- ever. And now I have to either believe your story -- or accept the fact that you've lied to me. If only you would just tell me the truth," he said. "Tell me that you had an affair while I was away. Instead of this, this *garbage*. How would you feel if I told you I had syphilis, Linda? And then told you I'd gotten it from a toilet seat? How would that make you feel? Knowing I was lying to you?"

"I've never lied to you before," said Linda. "And I'm not lying now."

He turned and looked at her, looked at her beautiful, sad face, streaked wet with tears, at the soft blond hair he loved, at her delicate figure. He wanted to reach out to her. He longed to hold her, and feel her return his embrace, but he just couldn't touch her now. He just couldn't.

"I'm going out," he said. "I've got to think. I'll be back later."

Actually, it hadn't really been a swimming pool -- not in the traditional sense, anyway. Not with chlorine and lifeguards and people splashing everywhere. As a matter of fact, Linda hated those kind of pools. She hadn't been to one of those in years.

It was a garden pool at the Dunton's old estate outside town. Three months ago, on a beautiful October day -- it was a slightly chilly day, she remembered, especially for New Orleans -- she had packed Pride and Prejudice into her knapsack and ridden her bicycle out into the country. As she rode by the Dunton Estate, she was pleasantly surprised to find there were no cars parked at the entrance. She had ridden past the place many times during the summer, and she had wanted to go in. But there had always been lots of visitors at those times, and she never felt up to mingling with crowds. But on this chilly Autumn day, the estate looked deserted. And it looked so peaceful, the perfect place to snuggle into her jacket and sit reading in the sunlight.

She rode her bicycle down the pothole-filled lane all the way to the foundation of the burned-down mansion. There was a wooden box mounted on a pole near the foundation. A large sign above the box said, "Please Take One -- Courtesy of the Louisiana Historical Society."

Linda raised the hinged cover of the box, removed a dull brown pamphlet, and read it. She cringed a little as she read the description of the night the house had burned.

Then she put the pamphlet back into the box.

Linda left her bicycle leaning against an ancient oak, and rambled off through the weedy remnants of the garden until she happened upon the wading pool. It was clear and flowing, the diverted stream still running giddily through it after all those years.

She sat down on the low stone wall beside the pool and took out her book. But she didn't open it for many minutes; instead, she sat looking over the pool and the decaying garden. It was so perfect, she thought, so utterly perfect. She even mused a little sheepishly about her own Romanticism, imagining herself to be a Dunton lady, reading in the sunshine by the wading pool, half-expecting to see a servant leading the children down to play, perhaps, or her distinguished father wandering down from the white steps of the mansion to have an idle afternoon chat with his favorite daughter.

The rubble of the mansion made the estate seem even more romantic, somehow,

than it would have seemed while the great house was still intact. Linda thought of the terrible blaze that had consumed the house and its occupants over a hundred years ago. She recalled the pamphlet's report of Lady Dunton's madness, her husband's dabbings in sorcery -- and the rumors that Lady Dunton herself had set fire to the house to destroy some terrible thing that had supposedly invaded it. The strangest story, she remembered, was that Lady Dunton's husband had escaped the blaze at the last minute by turning himself into a cat and leaping into the darkness.

Linda opened her book and began reading beside the gently whispering pool. It was not long until she became drowsy, sitting there musing over grander times and romantic legends.

She awoke as she was hitting the surface of the pool. In her panic, she floundered about for several seconds, her head under the chilly water, her sense of direction totally forsaking her. When she finally managed to get her head above the surface of the pool, she gulped for air, and stood up. She scrambled onto the wall, sat down, shivered a little, and then found herself laughing at what had happened.

She must have looked like such a ninny!

Going to sleep reading, and then falling into the pool! She sat there giggling at herself for several more seconds.

And then she saw the cat.

It was a mass of floating fur -- orange and brown spikes radiating outward from its thick, muscled body. It was floating just beneath the surface, near the center of the pond. Its green eyes were open wide and seemed to be staring at her.

Its expression -- if a dead cat could be said to have one -- was one of shocked, but strangely contented amazement. Its face was wide and flat, its nose particularly long -- the harshly masculine face of a tomcat.

Linda felt her stomach tighten into a thick knot, and her lips began quivering uncontrollably. How long had she slept before falling into the water? And why hadn't she heard the drowning cat? It had undoubtedly floundered about for several minutes before it died -- it *must* have been splashing loudly.

Why hadn't she waken up while all that had been going on? She had *never* slept that soundly in her life. Never.

Suddenly, she was afraid. And she was filled with revulsion for this place. She wanted nothing but to be away from here, to be home, to be warm and dry and clean. She felt so *filthy* now that she'd seen the cat. She felt as if whatever germs it carried were now swarming over her, infecting her with a hundred revolting diseases.

Perhaps the filthy animal had actually died while she was in the water with it.

Shivering even more in the growing breeze, she grabbed her book from the wall, snatched up her knapsack, and headed for her bicycle.

Three months later, she discovered she was pregnant.

It was nearly 4:00 am when Mark returned. Linda was sitting on the couch, waiting for him.

He walked over and stood beside her, looking down at her mournfully.

"I've decided it doesn't matter," he said. "It doesn't matter how it happened. But I don't want us to talk about that part anymore," he said. "Because no matter what may have happened, I still love you. And I'll always love you."

She stood up and embraced him. They held each other tightly, holding each other, it seemed, longer than they ever had before.

"I love you," she said. "I love you so much."

And with her joy at being again in her husband's embrace, came the fear --

the fear of what was growing inside her, and the fear that the way it came to be there was so bizarre and disgusting that she couldn't even talk about it with the one person she always had been able to talk to. For a moment she felt lonelier than she'd ever felt in all of her shy and lonely life.

"Mark," she said. "I don't have to have this baby . . . I can . . ."

"Shhh," he said, but he looked at her as if, for just a second, he too was thinking it would be the easiest solution.

"No," he finally said. "We'll have the child. That's something else I thought about while I was walking. I like the idea of having a child. I know everything we've said in the past. But now that it's on the way, I like the idea. I really do. I'd like you to have the baby."

And she said she would. She felt relieved at their decision. The trauma of the situation -- everything about it -- would only seem worse, somehow, if she knew she were facing an abortion.

But in spite of Mark's apparent acceptance of the child, Linda could see the pain in his eyes, and his wistful look of regret.

He embraced her again before she could say anything about it, and, by the time he released her, she had decided to remain silent.

The next week, Mark went away again on business. The night he left, Linda had the dream for the first time. It woke her screaming into their empty apartment.

She is floating on her back in a still, warm pond, the sunlight caressing her pale and naked skin. Her eyes are closed against the glare of the sun. She floats without effort, as if barely in the water, as if somehow floating above the water.

Suddenly, a shadow blocks out the glare of the sun. She opens her eyes just as something leaps upon her and pushes her beneath the surface of the pool. She struggles, running out of breath, but she is pinned down, writhing, trying to scream, trying to breathe.

And all at once, she is free, floating to the surface, breathing in deep, white air.

She climbs to the side of the pool and sits down on the wall. She stares at the pool's surface, scanning the reflections of trees and clouds until she sees the dead cat floating, the dead cat staring at her, as if it knows everything.

It lifts its head above the water. It meows seductively, and then begins swimming toward her. The breeze carries the smell of death to Linda's flaring nostrils.

It is then that she begins to scream.

It was to the sound of her own scream that she awoke. She reached frantically toward the bedside lamp.

She grabbed the chain and jerked on it. The light came on! It came on! She eagerly bathed in it, bathed in the reality of the lamplight shining into their room.

She lay awake looking at the familiar walls, and the pale, warm ceiling. She grabbed Mark's pillow and held it tight against her, reassured of its reality by the lingering scent of Mark's cologne.

But lying alone in their bed, she couldn't stop the onslaught of images that continued flashing before her -- they seemed to overtake her mind by force, making it conjure up still more -- still more images that she didn't want to see. But her susceptible mind was all too cooperative. It magnified and manipulated the stream of images until she saw them coalesce, and combine, and lead her to the realization of the inevitable, disgusting possibility.

It was the story of Lady Dunton's husband escaping from the blazing mansion

by turning himself into a cat . . .

"No!" she yelled into the empty room. "This is insane! I won't think about this. I won't!"

She threw back the covers and rushed into the kitchenette. She started the coffeemaker, turned on the radio, the TV, and all the lights in the apartment. Then she sat drinking cup after cup of coffee until the welcome rays of dawn warmed the windows.

She made another pot of coffee, and then sat staring vacantly at the TV, waiting, it seemed, for the week to end and Mark to come home, and waiting, too, for the months to pass until her womb could be free of the thing that grew within it.

When Mark returned, he was absolutely wonderful to her. He fixed all the meals. He cleaned the apartment. He played endless games of cards with her. He took her to movies and plays and museums.

But when he left again, the dream returned. And the waiting. The horrible waiting.

Toward the end of her term, it seemed Mark had to be away more than ever before. It was no one's fault, of course. It was just what his job demanded.

And it was no one's fault that Mark had to be out of town when Linda went into labor. It was no one's fault that she had to call the ambulance herself and be whisked away to the hospital at 3:00 am on a Wednesday morning.

Linda woke up in the nice white hospital room after it was all over. She awoke feeling contented and exhausted.

It was a boy. A 7-pound, 6-ounce boy. She'd glimpsed him for only a moment before they'd cut him away.

She settled back deeper into the pillow, wincing at the dull pain from her abdomen, then relaxing as the pain subsided.

The phone beside her bed began to ring.

She slowly reached a hand to the receiver, lifted it successfully, and held it to her ear.

"Linda?" said Mark.

She smiled.

"Yes, darling, yes," she said. "It's a boy! Did they tell you?"

"You bet," he replied. "You bet. It's great news, sweets. Absolutely great. Are you OK?"

"Fine," she said. "When are you coming home?"

"As soon as I can," he said. "As soon as the job's finished."

There was hesitation in his voice that bothered her, that instantly upset her.

"When will that be?" she asked.

"A couple of weeks, hon. A couple of weeks. I'm sorry. But I've gotta stay. They won't let me leave."

Linda could feel it. The tension in him. The sense that he didn't really want to see this child. That he didn't really accept it. That he was not pleased that it had finally arrived.

"That long?" she asked weakly, struggling not to cry.

"Maybe it won't take two weeks," he said quickly. "Things might go ahead of schedule. It just depends."

"I see," she said.

"I miss you."

"I miss you, too," she replied.

"Well, gotta go," said Mark. "I'll call tomorrow."

"Bye," she said.

She felt the tears begin to fall, felt the anguish well up inside her. And she was soon exhausted from the simple effort of crying -- so tired, so very, very tired.

She dozed.

When she awoke, a nurse was standing beside her bed holding the blanket-wrapped infant. But Linda could not see anything except dull white fabric.

"Hello, Linda," said the nurse.

"Hi," Linda said sleepily.

"Would you like to try breast-feeding your baby now?" asked the nurse.

"I suppose so," she said.

"If you'd rather not . . ."

"No, it's OK. I didn't mean to sound cranky. I'm just a little sleepy," Linda said quickly.

Linda pushed a button and began elevating the head of her bed.

"Do you remember what to do?" asked the nurse.

"Sure," she replied. "I read the book all the way through. It sounds easy."

Linda smiled self-consciously as she bared one of her breasts. The nurse handed her the baby. Linda held the baby close, positioning him carefully as she guided his face toward her breast.

"There you go," said Linda. "There you go." But the baby was already greedily sucking his first meal.

The nurse smiled. "Good," she said. "That's just fine."

"Thanks," said Linda.

"I'll be back in twenty minutes or so," said the nurse. "Is that OK?"

"Sure. We'll be fine, won't we, Glen?" (She'd decided long before his birth that, if it were a boy, she'd name him Glen. It was one of her favorite names for a boy. And it was Mark's middle name. She hoped Mark would be pleased.)

The nurse left, closing the door most of the way behind her as she went.

So this is what all the anxiety's been about, thought Linda. So this is it. She studied him as he sucked eagerly from her breast. He was beautiful. Just beautiful. So what if his father was a mystery-man? So what if she would never know who he was and why his sperm were in that pool? Maybe there really was something to the business of fate. Maybe Someone up there had never intended that she and Mark remain childless. Maybe it had been in the plans all along that she should end up falling into that particular pool on that chilly October day.

As she stroked Glen's fuzzy head, she realized contentedly that she had never thought it would be like this. The tranquility. The satisfaction. The pure joy of motherhood.

Glen continued sucking greedily, making little slurping noises. He was kneading the skin around her breast with his tiny fingers.

Linda smiled again.

The baby grew even more eager, kneading her skin, and pressing his mouth even more tightly against her breast as he continued sucking.

"Ouch, honey," she suddenly said. "Not so hard."

It was then that he bit down. Bit down hard.

She started to pull herself away from him. But he dug his fingers into her skin. And he bit down harder.

"Ow!" she said.

She jerked her breast away from his mouth.

As soon as she did, he lifted his head and began to cry. She looked into his face in sheer terror, studied his mouth in absolute disbelief. There were already eight teeth! Four sharp top incisors, and four shiny bottom ones!

It was then that he snarled, snarled like a mean stray cat yowling from an alleyway.

Linda began to scream.

The actual process of giving up her baby for adoption took only a matter of minutes.

The hospital people had tried to talk it over with her, to make sure she realized the gravity of what she was doing.

"He already has *teeth!*" Linda said. "The first thing he did was *bite me!*" (No, she wouldn't tell them about the yowling. She wouldn't. It was too horrible. Besides, had her child *really* made that sound? Or had she simply imagined it in the terror of that awful moment?)

"Linda," said the adoption counselor. "It's not unusual for a child to be born with teeth. It's not common, to be sure. But it happens. Why don't you take another look at him? So you can see there's nothing so horrible or out of the ordinary about him. I'll have a nurse bring him in so you . . ."

"No!" said Linda. "Just get rid of him for me. *Please!*"

"I'm sorry you feel this way," said the counselor. "But even if you *do* decide to give up your child, your husband will have to sign, too. He . . ."

"My husband isn't even the father. He's *not the father!* It doesn't matter what he thinks! Oh, please, just get rid of the baby for me. Where do I sign. Just show me where I sign!"

Mark called her that night.

"Hi, kid. What's up?"

For an instant, she thought she wouldn't tell him. She thought she couldn't stand actually knowing what his reaction was going to be. He might have reached his own decision by now. He might have decided he truly did want the child. And he might hate her for giving the baby up. "Oh, God!" she thought. "What if he tries to make me take him back?"

"Mark," she finally said. "I gave the baby up for adoption."

"What?"

"I gave him up for adoption. I didn't want him, Mark. He gave me the creeps. He *scared* me, Mark. He *bit* me." And then she was crying. She wanted Mark there with her. She wanted to hold him, to explain it all, to explain her terror, and her relief now that she knew the child was gone.

"It's OK, Linda," said Mark. "It's OK."

He hesitated. Linda continued to cry.

"I think you did the right thing. I think you made the right decision."

As soon as he said the words, she was ecstatic. Everything was going to be like it had been! Everything was going to be normal again.

"So you're glad?" she asked. "Are you really glad?"

"Yes," he said. "Oh, Linda. I was trying hard to accept the idea, to accept -- everything. But I was doing such a bad job. I was having a difficult time."

"I know, darling, I know." Her eyes filled with tears of relief.

They talked for several more minutes, both of them feeling better and better as the conversation drew to a close.

"Come home," said Linda.

"Soon. I promise. I swear I'll get away early."

In four more days, Linda left the hospital alone.

When she got back to their apartment, an odd, huge, horribly guilty sense of relief swept through her.

She was free of the child. The whole incident was behind her. She was free

of everything about it. Just like that. With one simple signature.

It was time to resume the normal routine of her life.

She turned on the hot water at the kitchenette sink and began washing the dirty dishes she'd left stacked on the counter six days ago.

It was 4:00 pm, and the apartment seemed far too quiet. She switched on the TV and turned it up loud. Then she returned to the sink and the dirty dishes. She felt happy and full of energy. She would finish the dishes first, then she'd vacuum. It didn't matter that the doctor had told her not to exert herself. She felt great! She felt wonderful! Mark would be home in two days. He would be so pleased to see a clean apartment. That would be just the thing to . . .

Then she heard the yowling.

Like a cat in pain, like a cat with its paw caught in a trap.

The sound had to be coming from the alleyway.

But why did it seem to be coming from the closet where she kept the vacuum cleaner?

Linda turned off the hot water.

She didn't hear the cat.

She knew it was ridiculous to check. But it sounded so much like it had been in the closet.

She took a step toward it. But she stopped. This was silly. This was absolutely ridicu . . .

She nearly screamed as the phone started to ring.

She dashed back into the kitchenette and grabbed the receiver.

"Hello?" she said, somehow fully expecting to hear the cat yowling at her, and then realizing what an odd thought that was and how strange she felt.

"Hi, sweets," said Mark. "Guess what."

"You're coming home?" she said instantly.

"Good guess. I'm on my way now. We finished early. The job's over."

"Fantastic!" she said. "Where are you? When will you be home?" (God, it would be wonderful! God, she needed him. She really needed him. She felt herself trembling.)

"I'm in Washington State," he replied. "I should be home about 1:00 am."

"Fantastic!" she said, nearly sobbing. "I'm so glad . . ."

"Sorry, sweets, gotta run! See you soon. Gotta catch my plane."

"Bye," she said.

"Bye!"

She hung up and headed back to the dishes. She was in such an odd mood! First terrified -- hearing the cat -- thinking it was inside -- having such odd feelings. And now! So full of energy! Eager to see Mark -- just knowing he was on the way made everything OK. And all this energy inside her! She was ready to wash those dishes now. And vacuum those floors, and wash those walls. Hell, why not even paint that damn ceiling!

Halfway through the dishes, she realized she was tired.

And a little sore. Her abdomen ached. And she felt queasy.

She decided to lie down and rest . . . just for a while, she assured herself. She went into their bedroom and lay down. She put her head on Mark's pillow, breathing in the faint odor of cologne that still clung to its fibers.

She thought, for a second, that she heard the cat yowl as she was falling asleep, but then it went away . . . and she was too tired to care . . . just too tired.

Linda awoke to the eerie half-light of their bedroom -- awoke to feel the baby's mouth on her right breast, awoke to see his shadowy form snuggling tight against her.

She could see his gleaming eyes wide and angry, his lips puffy and grey.

She felt her head throbbing, the blood in her temples surging against the aching nerve endings around her eyes.

Her breast ached, as though it had been cut.

She lifted her hands feebly to the crest of his furry head. The child growled like a possessive cat guarding its territory. Linda cringed and tried to push the baby's head away from her.

But she felt so weak, as if she'd lost a lot of blood, and he was so strong. He growled again.

Linda tried to cry out for help, but couldn't even do that.

She barely had the strength to let her hands flop useless back at her sides.

She closed her eyes, imagining, for a moment, that it was all a dream, all . . . just . . . a . . . terrible dream.

But she felt him tighten his grip on her breast, felt him wriggling against her, felt his eager teeth chewing at her.

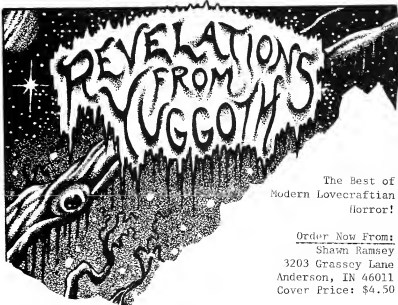
"Easy," she would have said softly. "Easy," she thought.

He bit deeper.

"Ooh," she rasped. But then it was OK. Then it barely hurt at all.

And, as the minutes passed, she could barely feel his mouth clamped on her breast, sucking through the ever-growing wound as he bit deeper and deeper to get at it, keep it flowing, to keep it running warm and free.

Just as Mark entered their room to find Linda's white and bloodless body, he saw a bloated child leap from the window sill into the dark alleyway beneath.

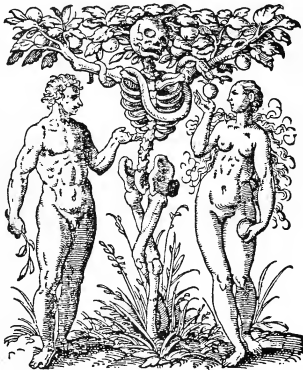


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THE DOGS

By Jeffrey Osier

Pretty soon the dogs stopped coming home. At night you could hear them, yelping and howling as they ran in packs through the trashed and deserted streets, as though they alone had no reason to fear the things that moved through the night with them.

This was at a time when we could still move around with some degree of confidence during the diminishing daylight hours. We'd get together on corners, front porches, around the rusted, burnt out car wrecks. Occasionally we would see several of them, moving quietly through the town. Most of the time they'd ignore us, as though all their senses were occupied in the rigors of a neverending hunt. We'd watch them and talk about how it might be a good thing to have the dogs patrolling the streets, how maybe the rest of humanity had given up on us or died off but wouldn't it just be the way that our dogs saved us in the end.

Once I even saw a dog, a big black mutt, trotting down the street with one of the things in its mouth. It created quite a scene, especially when we noticed that the thing wasn't quite dead yet. Half the people on the street darted for cover, into alleys or stores, while the rest of us formed a crowd around the dog. He dropped it — a small one, I confess — in front of us and then gloated in the praises and caresses we bestowed upon it as someone went to hunt down a can of dog food for him. Meanwhile, the thing was prodded out into the middle of the street with the nozzle of a rifle, where it was shot several times and then

burned.

Have you ever seen one after its been burnt? It's funny, the fire will burn away all traces of tentacles, the leathery shell, and the big, bloated eye-things — which is almost all you can ever see of them when they're alive — leaving only a scorched black set of braces that may or may not be ribs, and which seem to bear no resemblance to the creature once attached to it.

We have so little idea — even now — of exactly what they look like. We always burn the remains without too much examination. It's considered bad form to show too much curiosity about things like that. Fear and revulsion always overwhelms any sense of planning or strategy. As things get worse, this fact is only reinforced. We don't stand. Their shrill hissing, their monstrous odors, their murderous efficiency, only makes us cower.

But the dogs never had such problems. Right from the start, they were fascinated by them. Fascinated to the point of abandoning their human companions and taking off into the hills and woodlands to hunt the things.

Did they eat them? No one ever found out for sure, but everyone whose former dog traveled with the packs could assure you that there was no way their Rufus-Cody-Miles-Sundance-Gopher-Balzac-Rusty could ever stomach anything so foul.

It didn't matter. Many people felt the loss of having an alert, nearly prescient animal to guard their homes, but at the same time we talked a lot about how much safer the town as a whole would be if the dogs were given free reign. Obviously, we hadn't been in control for quite some time.

And it was true that for about two weeks, there actually seemed to be a relationship between the frequency of dog yelps and the infrequency of the attacks. Fewer people *seemed* to die or disappear during that time, but as our records show, the average was actually only slightly less than normal.

Up until then, the average had been fourteen a day.

And the relatives or housemates of those slightly less than fourteen people a day, many of whom themselves were burned or bitten or pierced in those death struggles, never had any illusions about how great a contributions the dogs were making.

It was about that time that we lost our phone lines. Luckily we still had television, which had long since given up talking about the minor nocturnal disturbances occurring in our quarantined, blockaded town. TV gave us a much needed sense of communion with the outside world, even as we learned to hate and resent it and wonder if the outside world, for all the good it did us, still even existed.

On the night one of them got into my house, the dogs were actually roaming my street in full force. For a while, some of them congregated in my front yard, howling out threats that were enough to keep anyone off the streets.

This is what I was telling myself as I paced the upstairs hallway — wondering if maybe we'd made a mistake letting the dogs go wild like that. I still had hope that there might be enough of them to kill the things off, but I had to wonder just how much safer we'd be afterwards, with over a hundred ragged, hungry dogs prowling the streets.

I passed my father's bedroom door and heard a sound inside. I stopped, put my ear to the door and heard the wet grinding, crunching and gurgling noises that always meant the same thing.

I threw the door open and there it was, twice as big as any I'd ever seen, like a hideously-spiked oyster with retracting tentacles and long, segmented legs that straddled the bloodied, hollowed mass where my father's head and chest had once been.

I slammed the door and ran for the guns. Barbara and the kids were awake now, and I had to scream at them to keep away from the door.

We spent the rest of the night putting out the fire and cleaning up the room.

Then we dragged the bodies and linen outside and finished burning them.

I stood there watching the flames, sometimes thinking of my father, sometimes thinking of the thing spreading its tentacles out wide for me as I'd opened the door, hissing out its horrible, hungry battle cry. In the background I could hear the dog noises.

This thing had been bigger than any dog I'd ever seen. They could get bigger than any of us had ever realized. And it took six shots without even flinching before Barbara torched it. Even as we had dragged it outside we could still detect life in the chopped and charred pieces.

Hope in the dogs wore off soon enough. For awhile, people complained that the dogs were more dangerous than the things were, never realizing that the real problem was that they weren't nearly dangerous enough.

One old woman was mauled to death by a pack of dogs. It was the only fatality ever attributed to them.

And then, one morning, the dogs disappeared. Over the next few weeks some of their bones, and occasionally even an intact skeleton would turn up on a conspicuous spot in town, strategically placed as though to remind us all of who our real masters were, and what was bound to happen to every one of us, sooner or later.

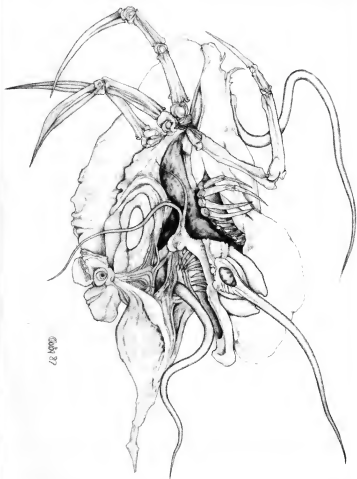
No more dog cries every night. No more stragglers wandering downtown streets in the afternoon.

It hadn't been a very good idea, but after all, it had been the dogs' idea, not ours. And it provided us with a distraction and a few brief moments of hope.

Soon the giants among them grew more and more conspicuous.

And then, without ever having prepared or even thinking about it, the snows came. Deeper and more violent than anyone could even remember.

And with that, the breeding season.



I, KRALL

By Mark Rainey

*B*owen, damn it, I got you. You righteous son of a bitch, I beat you. Here I am two feet shy of hell, cold and starving, but when this is all over, it'll be you that's in fucking agony.

Half a world away from home, half-blinded from holing up in near-total darkness for almost a week, Arnie Krall could not have been happier. The discomfort was going to pass. His sight would be better than it ever had been when he next emerged into daylight with half a million dollars under his belt. Nobody would be chasing him when he broke out of this rig. In fact, in a few days, he wouldn't even be himself any more. He would be the right honorable Thomas M. Perry, a wealthy recluse in some small town in Colorado. Maybe then he would even put the fear of God in Bowen — turn the tables, that's the ticket. Bowen would be easy to find.

You bastard.

The reeking tarpaulin of oil, must and humidity now weighed slightly less heavily than it had for the first couple of days. His ears had grown accustomed to the hydraulic banging that never ceased down in this hold. There had been rats, too. Lots of them. Big ones. He might have known that a Nip freighter carrying rice and soybeans would quite naturally lure hordes of the vermin on board (little buggers probably had slanty eyes, too). At least he had not been bitten or chewed while he slept in his greasy cubbyhole, though on more than one occasion, he had felt a slick, scrabbling body upon his arm or leg. Three more days. Once they reached Honolulu, he could take an airliner to L.A. or San Francisco. He had already endured this much; he would handle the rest of the hardship like a trooper.

Bowen, you shell-headed, righteous bucket of piss. I'll shit all over you, I will. I'll watch your eyes melt right out of your face. I wanna see your brain fry.

It had not been easy. Yakovi had trained him well, though. The fucking Russkis had their hot potato now (may it scorch their bloody hands) and he had his riches. That's where it all ended up — he had what he wanted. Most likely, once the Reds learned enough about what they had to be dangerous, he would be dead of old age, ambivalent, apathetic, and totally fucking happy for it. Yakovi had gotten the right man for the job, no mistaking that.

God, Bikini Atoll had been such a spectacle. Such power from such a tiny egg! Hard to fucking believe. In that respect, he could almost sympathize with Bowen's obsessive fear that someone irresponsible might manage to acquire the power that, until now, only his western Capitalist brothers had mastered. But whatever Krall's functionally impotent conscience whispered to him about his deeds, he blithely disregarded the fact that he had been party to an assured shift in the balance of world power. Future consequences, even those that might occur in his own lifetime, had played no part in his decision. He was rich, and whatever his ideals had been, that's all that mattered now. He could afford to thumb his nose at all the vile pawns of American bureaucracy he had suffered for so many years. And Bowen was on top of his thumb list.

Son of a bitch!

Krall tipped his bottle of tepid saké to his lips and harshly swallowed a long draught. Filthy stuff. The Japs couldn't even provide decent booze. But it did have the desired effect of relaxing his aching joints and softening the pounding in his head. There were several cases full of these bottles in this hold, as well as crates of dried rice, and for the time being, he had to be thankful for even this meager subsistence. As soon as he got out of here, he would treat himself to the best piece of beef in Hawaii and get stinking drunk on some first-class alcohol.

Three more days. Krall was not a two-bit hood. He had studied physics at Harvard and graduated with honors and a degree in the newly-developed nuclear dynamics field in 1949. From there, he had sought after his Master's Certificate in the same school. But his particular temperament became a stumbling block for him, specifically, his outspoken political idealism (considered by most of his peers to be deviant), which he occasionally voiced in his classrooms. He publicly announced his admiration for Karl Marx's The Communist Manifesto, a writing which he lauded as being a work of theoretical genius. He had even attempted to organize a seminar on the Marxist political system, at which time he fell into unmitigated disfavor with his professors and fellow students. With the advent of national paranoia rumbling on the horizon, he was quickly labelled a communist by the school's distinctly conservative faculty. He began to find his studies blocked by acts of professional intolerance: his papers became mysteriously lost, he was completely ignored in class, his notes were repeatedly stolen or defaced. Finding himself unable to gain any ground against the vast opposition surrounding him, he left the school voluntarily in the spring of 1951, saving himself the embarrassment of being expelled.

What had begun as an essentially benign desire to objectively examine and understand an alternative system of ideals became an almost twisted preoccupation with deriding his own society's culture and political structure. He began publishing a leftist newsletter that he circulated through various institutions of higher learning, while at the same time continuing his study of atomic energy on his own. He managed admirably, but was by now a complete outsider to his own field of academics; he had no friends, no professed supporters, very little money. By fall of that year, it became apparent that young Krall would have no option other than to return home to Baltimore in poverty and ignominy.

Then he met Professor Klaus von Hergersheim, a physicist from Germany that had been involved in the development of the Hiroshima A-bomb. Von Hergersheim approached him directly, having learned of Krall's notoriety and his proficiency in nuclear thermodynamics. The old professor had set up a private laboratory outside of New York City, where his theoretical work continued under contract with the U.S. Government. Krall was offered a position as an assistant, which he accepted cheerfully enough, though with some question as to why the professor had taken such an interest in his political views.

He found out soon enough. Von Hergersheim apparently had linked up with a Soviet courier, and was clandestinely providing America's nemesis with a source of choice technological information. The Reds found Krall a particularly appealing subject for indoctrination, as he discovered through numerous covert communications and meetings. The prospect became rather thrilling, and before he knew it, he found himself immersed in what he would have once considered an absurd, foolhardy game of intrigue.

Three years previously, the Reds had successfully planted a man in what was to become the Bikini Atoll project team. Then, the Russian machine had obtained security clearance for Krall under an assumed name with expertly forged credentials, with enough background to satisfy any scrutinizing investigator. Of course, Krall possessed all the practical knowledge necessary to play his role as a technical supervisor with professional alacrity. He was promised great rewards and a new chance at life, all of which were fine; but even that was secondary to the fact that he now had the opportunity to vindicate himself upon those that had so utterly alienated him. Just like the proverbial mad scientist in the movies. I, Krall, the avenging wizard.

How fucking rich! Colin Clive, you got nothing on me.

After carefully maneuvering himself into strategic placement, he had not only

managed to transmit copies of technical data to Yakovi, who was based somewhere in the Sakishima Islands just south of Japan, but he had also stolen a tiny measure of plutonium and delivered it to Yakovi via his comrade courier. All this directly under the eye of the Federal Government, who had implemented security measures the likes of which would have been unimaginable before Hiroshima. Krall had to laugh . . . no, *howl* at the odds he had overcome.

But eventually, Dr. Harold Bowen, chief of the stage one development unit, approached him guardedly concerning a particle shield casing that had been discovered missing. As his training dictated, Krall produced his altered records, showing that one such unit had been discovered defective and discarded via the proper channels. He had covered himself and adequately transferred the blame to their internal shipping department, whose files had also been "uprooted" in one of their hasty relocations to new field sites. He had behaved by the book . . . and yet, he had found himself sweating under Bowen's rigorous questioning. Then he saw that damned look of Bowen's . . . the probing, glaring eyes . . . and that expression of satisfaction.

Bowen knew. *He knew!*

The first tests went without a hitch. God, what a spectacle. Seeing that blast was enough to warrant the risks he had taken. But Krall was now in the field with no backup. The Reds had gotten what they wanted and gotten out. He managed to steer clear of Bowen, but he knew the man would be after him when the inevitable confirmation of his suspicions arrived. Bowen had been doing some homework. Now Krall could not eat or sleep, and he worked morosely like a man with a weight on his shoulders. Twice he had seen Bowen watching him like a hawk, those blasted little eyes taking in his every move. Somehow he had to get away.

Then he saw his chance. A supply plane came in during the night in the opening phase of the second test. Under cover of darkness, Krall stowed away in the cargo hold and waited until the plane took off again for Tokyo. Thank God, he had not been discovered missing before the plane was in the air. However, he expected that, immediately upon landing, the plane would be besieged by hordes of security men intent on bringing him in. To avoid that, he made his exit via the lower cargo hatch while the plane was still taxiing to the gate. He received a few abrasions and bruises from the attempt, but came out otherwise unscathed. Then it became a simple matter to wire the States, confirm that an account had been opened in his new name for \$500,000, and then arrange transportation back. In a safe box in Honolulu he would find all the material he needed to establish his new identity. He avoided the airports and standard shipping lines, and elected to stow away on a freighter bound for Hawaii. So far, everything had gone his way. He had beaten Bowen's ass and was nearly home free.

He choked down another long draw of Saké. His head swam this time, and he realized he had achieved a near-plastered state. It was wonderful.

Watch out! Here comes Arnie Krall. I busted you, Bowen. Busted Mr. President. Busted the fucking world, I did. I, Krall.

Outside, the world would be under cover of night. In here, there was never any day. Just a long, humid night that smelled like piss. God, he was hungry for some real food. The Nips didn't even eat real food. Just a lot of dead, fucking fish.

A dead fish would be better than this hard, tasteless rice. Maybe . . .

Krall shifted uneasily. The confinement was getting old. Perhaps he could make it up to the deck for a while — just a little while. Air himself out. It was a big ship. Surely, he could get by without being seen. He had done it this far.

Another long drink. The bottle was nearly gone. No problem. There was plenty at his disposal. No one to stop him.

That's right, no one to stop me. Only the gods can stop me now. Only the gods . . .

He stood up, wavering slightly on his feet. He had to remain partially crouched or he would strike his head on the overhanging pipes. His legs were a little unsteady, both from alcohol and from having been curled up in his hole for so long. He was sticky and grimy. Maybe it was he, not the hold, that smelled like piss.

He began walking down the aisle between the huge crates piled up on either side. He set his sights on the gangway at the end of the chamber which led up to the outer deck. Already he could feel the cleansing chill of the night air sweeping over his aching body. Perhaps this was indeed a good idea . . . he would just be careful no one saw him emerge.

The floor rocked slowly beneath his feet. A dizziness suddenly gripped him, one that did not feel like an effect of alcohol. Too harsh . . . too painful. He reached out a hand to steady himself, gripped the edge of a crate and leaned there for a moment waiting for the feeling to pass.

Vertigo assailed him suddenly, nearly throwing him to the floor. He raised his hand and rubbed his temples, cursing gruffly beneath his breath. When he removed his hand, a number of strands of hair pulled away with it. A disturbingly large number.

What the hell?

He continued on his way, with a nagging apprehension settling heavily upon him. His mind tried to ignore the flash of alarming intuition that suddenly struck him, cold, cruel and real in its implications. There was no way it could be that . . . no radiation could have ever reached him. He had always been shielded. No way.

I'm almost home-free now. I have won. Nothing can stop me now. Nothing.

He reached the iron stairway that led upwards and mounted the first step, his mind screaming out, "No . . . no . . . no!" It was merely the booze, the very bad booze causing him to feel like this. In a little while, after he had gotten some fresh air, he would be fine . . . his old self again. No sense in getting worked up.

He must be getting paranoid. Just the after-effects of all this pressure. The strain had been considerable.

Rich . . . he was richer than hell now. That's all that mattered, no? What about all those political ideals . . . Marxism . . . he had done all this for what he believed, had he not? He was not just any other wealthy capitalist now, was he? There had been a message to this. He hadn't done it for the money.

Not I, Krall.

He reached the top of the steps. From beyond the hatchway came the regular drumming of waves, the low drone of the breeze. No sound of activity nearby. Chances were, nobody would be down at this end of the deck now. He took the door handle in his grip and twisted it slowly, pushing the door open just a hair.

A quick gust blew past his face. Beyond the door, it was dark, but not as dark as the pit from which he had just crawled. There was no one nearby, as far as he could tell. It must be safe to go out on deck . . . only for a few moments. Then, like it or not, he would have to turn back. He could not be caught now.

The dizziness seemed to have passed. He was his old, controlled self again. No problem. Drunk, but not sick. Richer than hell and happier than shit.

Home free now, you bastards. Nothin' and nobody kin stop me now.

He stepped onto the deck. The air was clean and fresh. The breeze, even for an August night, was cool. This was the life. The summer of '54 was the time of his life. This was *his* summer.

He let the wind wash over his face. He had forgotten the last time he felt so good. If only he didn't have to go back to that accursed pit so soon. Down there with the rats . . . the stinkin', bloody rats.

He walked forward along the railing. Out at sea, the darkness of the ocean blended into the darkness of the sky, so that there was no demarcation between the two. Almost eerie . . . but so beautiful. Somewhere forward, he heard sounds . . . music, he thought. Hard to tell above the pounding of the waves against the hull. No one, absolutely no one was aware of him.

Behind him, there were portholes. He should not stand here, for someone inside might look out and see him. Better move.

As he turned, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the glass. He froze. That had not been his face there. Had someone been looking out?

No. The portal was empty. But there was a face . . . something grotesque. He raised his hands to his face . . . touched his cheeks, his lips, rubbed his forehead. Some hair fell out.

No! No! No!

His flesh was swollen and disfigured. There was no pain . . . not yet . . . but he had changed. His hands . . . he studied them. There were small, painless blisters along his fingers. The edges of his palms were bloated and pinkish. What the . . .

No! No! No!

Nobody knew about all the side effects of radiation. It could be lethal, slow and agonizing. It was horror.

Not me! Not I, Krall! Nobody kin stop me! I'm home free! Only the gods . . . only the fuckin' godz kin stop me now!

He recognized the sounds from the distance as a guitar and harmonica . . . a rhythmic, melodic tune . . . the sailors were out on deck playing . . . oblivious . . . alive . . . clean.

From somewhere far off, there came a low booming sound. A huge geyser of water erupted off the port bow, followed by a bright flash of light. Some kind of bellowing roar rose into the night, ringing in his ears like a dreadful dirge. Something black rose from the frothing sea.

Krall ignored it. He was dizzy again, and starting to feel nauseous. It had to be the booze! He was not suffering radiation poisoning . . . no way . . . not he . . .

Not I, Krall.

Nobody knew all the horrors radiation produced. Many Hiroshima survivors were only now falling ill, nine years after the blast. What the hell had happened to him? How?

His attention returned to the shape off the port bow. Something huge . . . something monstrous. A great reptilian giant with glaring eyes and glowing plates on its back . . . towering over the ship . . . white fire beginning to build deep in its cavernous throat. Some kind of horror.

Fire swept across the deck of the *Musashi Maru*, enveloping the ship, the sailors, I Krall. His agony lasted only a moment, then his disfigured, radiated body wasted away to only a cinder. The freighter's insides blew skyward, and the burning shell began to settle in the water. There were no survivors.

Harold Bowen never found Arnie Krall, even though the government tracked down his bank account, his phony credentials, his new residence. As far as he knew, Krall must have skipped the country, never to be heard from again.

Arnie Krall would never know it, but he had been spared the horror of a slow, lingering death from radiation poisoning. To him, the godz had been merciful.

Reflection

By Geri Eileen Davis

His image reflected in the mirror
staring and tearing him apart
What he saw was not just his reflection
but the innermost thoughts of his heart
He could not believe all he saw
and he screamed out in pain and in anger
As he relived his own evil thoughts
to himself he had become a stranger
At last he could stand it no longer
and he picked up the mirror to smash
but it was his own mind he shattered
and trapped in the fragments of glass

Ebon Roses . . .

the scent of her perfume

By t. Wlnter Damon

Death be not a patient mistress
One to tarry at the threshold
To linger,
to await her lover's pleasure

Death be not a timid mistress
To blush and bow her head demurely
Her kiss is bold,
a wild flame tinged with icy chill

Death be not a chaste-limbed mistress
To shyly wait for soul's embrace
Eagerly she draws you
into her secret darkness

Dissipation,
Dissolution,
In her charms

Death be not a fickle mistress
To merge as one and then to leave
She recants not,
Her tryst is for eternity

DIABOLIQUE

Review Column By Roger Dale Trexler

Welcome. This is, I hope, the first in a long line of small press review columns that I shall be writing for DEATH-REALM. I will be as honest as possible about every magazine I review, and I intend to lay it right on the line if I feel a magazine isn't worth its cover price. Being a working writer myself, I know that many of you — other writers — can't afford to buy all those magazines to which you try to sell stories. I hope to point out some of the ones that I feel need the attention to keep them in business, solely on the merit of the magazine itself.

And so being the honest person I am, I'll never ever lie to you.

So, now past the basics, let's begin with: THE DEATH OF A GENTLEMAN: THE LAST DAYS OF HOWARD PHILLIPS LOVECRAFT by R. Alain Everts (published by the Strange Company, P.O. Box 864, Madison, WI 53701). R. Alain Everts is one of the top experts on the life and times of H. P. Lovecraft and August Derleth, and this 29-page book tells the story of Lovecraft's final days — including a never before published diary by HPL from 1937. If you have never had the pleasure of reading Everts' emotional accounts on Lovecraft, this is the book for you. It is extensively researched, finely detailed, and well worth the \$4.00 price tag.

Write the Strange Company for a full catalog of their forthcoming publications. By the time you read this, ETCHINGS & ODYSSEYS #9 and #10 ought to be in print. This magazine — dedicated to and following in the tradition of WEIRD TALES — is beautifully printed on glossy paper (from India, no less) and generally runs 100 pages or so.

Also on the agenda from The Strange Company, the expanded version of Paul Dale Anderson's excellent short story collection, THE DEVIL MADE ME DO IT. This reprint of the first edition — which is now out of print — includes several new stories by one of horror's finest talents. Anderson is also the Vice President of The Horror Writers of America.

THE MAGE, WINTER 1987 ISSUE. \$2.00 from The Student Association, Colgate University, Hamilton, NY 13346. This is a magazine that I have only recently discovered, having picked up a

copy at the MadCon convention in Madison, WI.

— And a worthwhile venture it is.

There is an article by artist Rodger Gerberding (one of my favorite artists) on the works of another artist, Frank Utpatel, the Arkham House jacket specialist. This article goes fairly in-depth, and Gerberding gives insights into the working of his genius. For the article alone the issue is worthwhile.

But the fiction is surprisingly good also. Although THE MAGE is a college produced magazine, it is the best I've seen in that category.

2AM MAGAZINE, VOLUME 1, ISSUE #4. Box 50444, Chicago, IL 60650-0444. \$3.95 per issue (plus \$1.00 postage and handling); 4 issue subscription for \$15.00.

If you haven't already bought a copy of 2AM, do it! This is the freshest breath of air in fiction market I've had in a long time. 2AM is one of my favorite small press, semi-pro magazines for one simple reason — variety. Gretta McCombs Anderson and her husband, writer Paul Dale Anderson, know the small press inside and out, and go out of their ways to deliver something fresh and exciting with each new issue.

I won't go in-depth into the fiction of this issue, but will say that 2AM's fiction is the height of dark fantasy.

Another bonus to this issue is the superb cover by Allen Koszowski. You have to see it to believe it.

Finally, if you don't have your issues of 2AM #2 and #3, you'd better get them while they last. I have been informed that 2AM's printer burned to the ground with the original plates to issues 1, 2, and 3 inside. Rather than go to the expense of having new plates made, the Andersons have decided to let these issues go out of print. A good chance to get in on a collector's item while it lasts. Issue #1 is already out of print.

MOONWALKER, 1832. This is a very nicely done broadside piece by Ed Shannon and artist Mike Odden. I think you'll be seeing a lot more of these two talented men in the coming years; they are both very outspoken and unique personalities. Ed, by the way, will be DEATHREALM's

book reviewer in coming issues.

I'm not sure if MOONWALKER, 1832 will be offered at the price for which I purchased it at MadCon (\$1.00), but it is surely worth whatever price Ed and Mike would ask for it — it's that nicely done.

Imagine the meanest illustration of a werewolf you've ever seen, a silhouette of the full moon behind him, and the ominous writing of Ed Shannon to complement the piece. I can feel the chills running up and down my spine already.

Query Ed Shannon for the price at Rt. #2, Box 132, Avon, MN 56310. Tell him Roger sent you.

This really isn't a small press magazine, but since I don't have anything else in my "current" reading file to review that is small press, I hate to say that TWILIGHT ZONE magazine, August 1987 edition, really floats a turd where your humble author is concerned.

Now, I know that TZ is supposed to be "top-of-the-line," but they just have not published anything recently (short of Harlan Ellison's excellent "Paladin of the Lost Hour" and "Nackles") that really interests me. And in this issue, they fall into another of my personal taboo areas: a novel excerpt.

For crying out loud.

Now I love Robert R. McCammon's work — I have since I saw the incredible "Night Crawlers" episode on TV's now defunct *Twilight Zone* series — but couldn't he have written a new story for this issue and passed on the excerpt from his new

novel, *Swan Song*? I'm going to latch on to the thing when I see it in the bookstores anyway — why tick me off by feeding me morsels and making want more before I can get more? And, to top that off, THE HORROR SHOW ran an excerpt of the same novel in their last issue!

Give me a break, please.

Most of the time — to me, at least — TWILIGHT ZONE Magazine tends to flop on its facelike a dead carp.

Sorry, TZ.

Well, that's all I can write now about publications of interest to those diabolical of heart among you. Come back next time and I promise to have a longer column with twice as many reviews (assuming, of course, editors out there want to have their publications reviewed). The address to send reviews copies is:

Roger Dale Trexler
Box 641
Jonesboro, IL 62952

Hope to see you then. And until then, happy hunting!

P.S. READERS WANTED! IF YOU LIKED THIS ISSUE, WHY NOT BUY DEATHREALM #1 AND #2? Both are still available for \$3.00 each, and contain some of the best writing the small press has to offer. Make checks payable to Mark Rainey, 8812 Jody Lane, #2A, Des Plaines, IL 60016. Buy them! Your local nightlight dealer will be glad you did! /All right, an unsolicited testimonial! — SMR/.

Deathrealm

The Gate Where Horror Begins

BACK ISSUES AVAILABLE:

DEATHREALM #1: The classic first issue, featuring novelettes by Mark Rainey and Jeffrey Osier. With contributions by Noel Williams, Joy Jolly, Jessica Amanda Salmonson. Art by Bill Gudmundson, Marlon West, Mark Rainey. Limited copies available, \$3.00.

DEATHREALM #2: More macabre masterpieces by Jeffrey Osier, Mark Rainey, Jeff Johnston, W. H. Pugmire. Additional work by Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Joy Jolly, Shawn Ramsey, Dwight E. Humphries. Artwork by Mark Rainey, Bill Gudmundson, Jeffrey Osier, Marlon West, Ted Piwowar. Still available for \$3.00.

Make checks payable to:

Mark Rainey, 8812 Jody Lane, #2A, Des Plaines, IL 60016

OUT FROM THE SHADOWS

Letters

W. H. Pugmire
Seattle, WA 98103

DEATHREALM #2 came yesterday, and once again I was very impressed. It is an improvement, even though your first issue was admirable. The heavier cover stock is an excellent idea, and the cover illustration is wonderful. I like lots of white space, a cover simply done. This one is eye-catching, which I'm sure will help get people to pick it up in shops and at cons.

"Threnody" is my favorite of all your tales, full of fanciful and fine writing — and so wonderfully Lovecraftian. A very powerful lead story, and one I'm certain will thrill your readers.

Bill's disturbing illo was great. Jessica's poem was well-done, as usual. I was happy to see two poems by Kim L. Neidigh, whose work will also be appearing in my TALES OF LOVECRAFTIAN HORROR. "Home of the Dead" is one of your better poems.

Marlon West, Animator: any relation to Herbert, Re-animator? A very odd and interesting illo, but all that black ink must have annoyed your printer. I've had printers refuse to publish certain fanzine covers because of too much solid black area. *Naw, Barry is a nice guy and does a fine job, I think you must agree — SMR/.*

"Life to the Fullest" moved me for personal reasons. My Pa used to take me hunting. It was a disturbing experience, but ended soon enough when, trying to load the rifle, I accidentally fired it and nearly shot his foot off.

"Don't Clean the Aquarium!" is something I've looked forward to reading; I was delighted with it. Osier writes with loads of personality, a trait he shares with you. I write of moods and emotions, but my characters all seem alike to me, lacking any interesting personality traits. *I tell you, you know how writers are — their own worst critics, and all that — SMR/.* Jeff's narrator is as interesting as that which occurs to him. His relationship to the thing, his muted relationship to those others who shared his experience, was of great interest. The twisted attitudes of a tale such as this always make me want to get to know the author. To infuse one's writing with one's personality is to create fiction that is individual in mood and style, and this is a great deal of Lovecraft's charm and fascination as a writer.

I hope to see many more Osier offerings in future issues. Gad, he even draws well!

Jeff Johnston is a name I remember, and I'm glad to see his tale herein. I liked the contrast of the emotional Bartlett as compared to the other characters. One can feel his confusion, and sense the final impulse which causes him to turn on the flashlight.

I was very impressed with Shawn's poem. I find him a better poet than fiction writer, and look forward to seeing what he does as an editor. "Annealed" was fabulous, moving and disturbing. I'm so glad you publish poetry, as it is a perfect medium for horror.

Backcover was great, as was all of this issue's artwork.

I'm sure that this issue will impress all those who see it. In two issues you've become one of the more reliable and readable of the small press horror magazines.

Shawn Ramsey
Anderson, IN 46011

DEATHREALM #2 was superior to #1 by miles! The glossy cover, as well as the superior cover art made this one a true event, and set it among the foremost in the field. The typesetting in the first issue was amazing enough, and now a glossy cover — all I can say is, let's see you top it! */How's this one? — SMR/.*

The contents, too, improved greatly, particularly, the artwork. Of course, Mr. Pugmire's story was bang-up, as is usual with his macabre adeptness, blending into a new setting (for him) like the crafty old Shoggoth he is. On a personal level, however, I find his Sesqua Valley writings so incredibly stirring that I am often disappointed in seeing works with other settings. But this one was a surprise, and hats off to him for it.

Jeff Osier is truly gifted — hell, is he human? It's amazing what he has done with words — and as it turns out, with art, too! I'd like to get him to do some Mythos work for my own magazine (REVELATIONS FROM YUGGOTH).

Apparently, some evil twin of mine has been writing editorial letters again. But at least I know where he lives now. I'm referring, of course, to the diabolical error oc-

curring on my letter. Do remember, I live on Grasse Lane in Anderson, Indiana, never heard of Grasseville /Sometimes editors are funny that way — SMR/.

I am quite satisfied with how my poem turned out; it wasn't half as embarrassing as I thought it might be. Ah well, I guess it read pretty well, so let me know what sort of reaction you get on it (if any. I'm not vain enough to think anybody would really give a *sh/aarving cream* ... be nice and clean ... /.

Ramsey is not responsible for what he has just said, it was his evil twin speaking. You know, the one who lives in Grasseville ...

Scott Monroe
Albany, NY 12110

Ye gods, man, another issue of DEATH-REALM has fallen from the heavens. A true blessing, at that.

Graphically, I think you've got what might be the best pub of its type. And the material inside is improving greatly, not that anything in the first issue was bad. But your cover art again really sets the pace for what is to come — a real macabre treat, both visually and in mood.

"Threnody" was infinitely better than "The Arms of Doom" (in issue #1). Such Lovecraftian style I haven't seen in ages, and you make the style work in a modern setting, something that most imitative writers do not.

Pugnire's story, for such a short little thing, packs a powerful punch. Like yours, the almost Lovecraftian style is successfully transferred to a contemporary setting.

Lars Ullberg seems to be a little awkward in his presentation, and the idea of "reliving" death after death is not that novel. But at least all the different incarnations are so graphically described as to make one feel pretty uncomfortable. In that respect, it is very successful.

Ah, that inimitable Jeffrey Osier again. This man is a literary genius. "Don't Clean the Aquarium!" was as much an improvement over "The Encyclopedia for Boys" as "Threnody" was over "The Arms of Doom." There is so much lunatic energy hovering just beneath the surface that it's scary.

"Killer Image" by Jeff Johnston read well and made a very realistic and bleak rendering of what a jail is really like /I take it you know this? — SMR/. Add in an element of the supernatural and the result is a very disturbing tale of horror.

The poetry, unfortunately, I can't say a lot for. I'm just not a real fan of rhyme (or non-rhyme). The only one that has any effect on me at all is Dwight E. Humphries' "Annealed," which has a powerful thrust, like most of the fiction you present.

On the other hand, the artwork is sheer virtuosity in action. Osier's "thing" (Robert?) is beautifully rendered. Bill Gudmundson's warped creature was different! Effective, too. Marlon West turned out a strange piece of work. And I like it. Your work was stunning, especially the cover. The backcover was pretty good, though it doesn't seem to relate to anything in the issue (so what, I guess).

With this one behind you, I can't wait to see how you're going to top it /Well, Vern, seek no more. Looky what your old buddy Ernest has brought you!.

William Rasmussen
Hazlet, NJ 07730

I just had to write and thank you for the copy of DEATHREALM you sent. It was great!

The artwork was superb! While I'm not a poetry fan, the pieces in your mag were diverse and very interesting. Ullberg's was strange; Pugnire's horrifying; Johnston's very clever; Osier's monstrously vile; and yours ... I thought it was one of the best modern Lovecraftian tales I've ever read! It was engrossing from the first sentence (I like stories told in the first person) and swiftly moved along to its brooding, horrifying parting statement ... it was extremely original, and the lazy intensity built to the awesome climax at the perfect pace — I can really envision the tremendous bulk of the creature moving through the valley, or sitting patiently atop a hill against the setting sun. Whew! What more can I say? /This is just fine, thank you. I had to include this encouraging little clip. Forgive my self-indulgence — SMR/.





GEINSCAPE





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